

# 'HOMEAWAYNESS' : EXPERIENCING MOMENTS OF HOME AMONG CHINESE LABOUR MIGRANTS

Shuhua Chen

A Thesis Submitted for the Degree of PhD  
at the  
University of St Andrews



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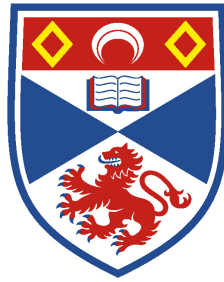
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# **‘Homeawayness’: Experiencing Moments of Home among Chinese Labour Migrants**

Shuhua Chen



University of  
St Andrews

**This thesis is submitted in partial fulfilment for the degree of PhD  
at the  
University of St Andrews**

**28<sup>th</sup> of July 2017**

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I, Shuhua Chen, received assistance in the writing of this thesis in respect of grammar, which was provided by Karolina Kuberska, Margaret Loney, Jonathan Alderman, Clare Sandford and Walter Hakala.

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# Abstract

Migration is a major feature of contemporary human life, while making home is ubiquitous. Being away from home creates a space for a migrant to rethink home and to make a home beyond something fixed, spatial, and material. This thesis concerns home and home making in the world of movement. It aims to investigate the ways in which labour migrants make home on their journey away from home, a home through which they express and fulfil themselves while making sense of the world.

Based on fieldwork in the Chaoshan region in South China, I approach individual migrants from two practices of migration that have affected the region in the last 150 years: the historical international Nanyang (Southeast Asia) migration (1860s to 1970s) and the contemporary internal rural-urban migration (1980s to present). Specifically, my fieldwork includes participant observation through working in a toy factory with migrant workers and living together with them for a year, as well as some months of archival research of remittance family letters (*qiaopi*) in a local archive.

To study these two different strands of Chinese migration is not aimed primarily at comparing or contrasting them; rather it is an attempt to explore the universal human capacity to make home in a variety of ways beyond socio-cultural or historical constraint. I argue that one experiences and makes sense of home in moments of being, while *making home, making self* (and vice versa) is a continual process. One is constantly in a process of self-negotiation, oscillating between identities that are being imposed and self-recognised, between one's reality and one's imagination, between one's past and one's future, and between one's rootedness and one's cosmopolitan openness.

I conclude the thesis by proposing five keywords for studying home-in-movement: *homeawayness, moments of being, interiority, cosmopolitan imagination, and walking knowledge*.

## Acknowledgements

My journey into anthropology has been a quest for home—an intellectual home to accommodate all my wonders, uncertainty, curiosity, and passion of humanity. It has been a journey of regrounding. It has been my rebirth. The story began when I audaciously quit everything in my life except love, and challenged myself to live a life full of the unknown (and let me skip all the tumultuous inner struggles that I have had). Without all the support, enlightenment, and love from my supervisors, colleagues, informants, friends, family, and strangers, I would not have been reborn for the second time.

A mug reading ‘KEEP CALM AND CARRY ON’ is the most precious gift that I received from my dear friend Andrew Cooper at the very first step of the journey, when I was preparing my Master’s/PhD application. I feel gratitude for Andrew’s encouragement and sharing of his British calm and Lake District peace with me along the entire journey.

I soon started my MRes study in social anthropology at the University of St Andrews. I would like to thank Dr. Stephanie Bunn, Prof. Christina Toren, Prof. Tristan Platt, Prof. Peter Gow, Prof. Nigel Rapport, Dr. Mark Harris and Dr. Tony Crook. Their teaching essentially nourished my research interest in exploring humanity with diverse approaches, such as how literature and anthropology may speak to one the other about humanity, how archives may retain not just history but also humanity, or, how we may sense the world as well as sense our humanity. I would like to thank Dr Huon Wardle and Prof. Tristan Platt for their invaluable feedback to my PhD research proposal. For MRes study, I feel utmost gratitude to my supervisor Dr. Stephanie Bunn. It was her greatest patience and sincere support all the time that reassured me to further pursue my PhD.

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*Looking back, coming to St Andrews to study was like throwing myself—a wild fruit-like me—into a big barrel; the air here mixed with the fresh North Sea breeze, insightful intellectual discussions, human kindness and love has been like the yeast; breathing the air day by day, year by year has been like the process of fermentation, so that, when I finished my study here, the wild fruit-like me could have become a bottle of fine barrel-fermented wine.*

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## **Ethical Note**

The main ideas I attempt to explore in this research project do not call for the people and places that give rise to them to be identifiable. In order to live up to my ethical responsibility to preserve the anonymity of the participants, individual identities will be described in such a way that community members will not be able to identify the participants in terms of their names and relationships. I have also altered the names of some places and other details as necessary.



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# Introduction

## *At Home in My Imagination*

### Project Initiative

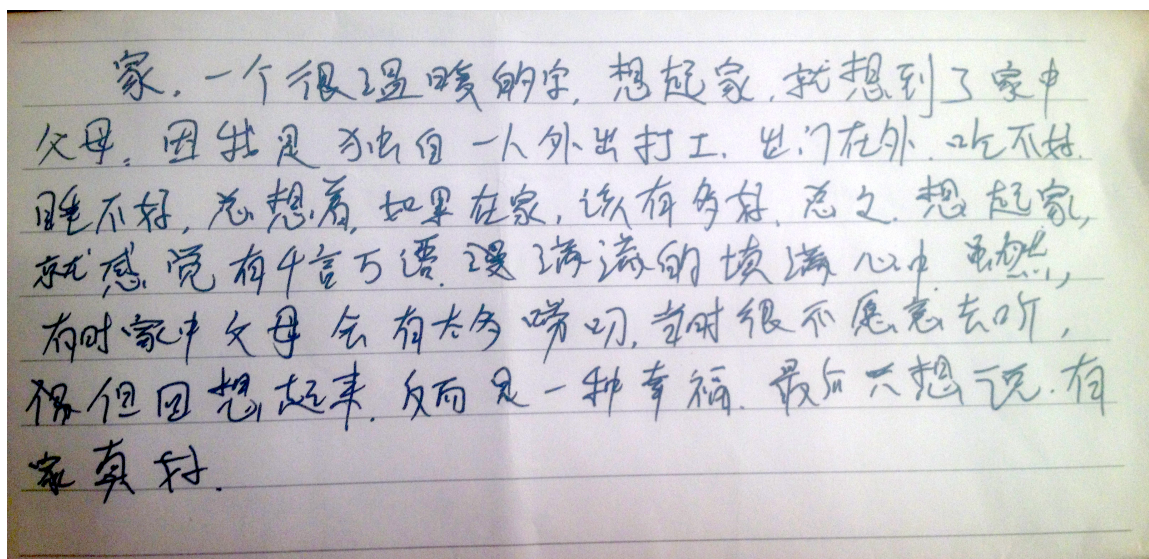


Figure 1 – A notion of home from a migrant worker

*'Home, it is a word with a temperature; it warms me. When I think of home, my parents, who I have left-behind at home, appear in my mind; I am the only one who steps out of home for work. Being away from home, I do not eat well, I do not sleep well; I always imagine how wonderful it would be if I were at home. Anyway, I feel my heart filled with thousands of words when I think of home. Although sometimes I could not stand my parents' nattering when I was at home, retrospectively, I actually think that is a kind of happiness. In a word, I just want to say, it is so good to have a home.'*

This is a notion of home from my informant, a migrant factory worker. It is a gift I just received from my fieldwork 'farewell party' with my fellow factory workers. Reading it aloud again and again, it warms me in this cold winter evening.

It is a moonlit night. I am lying awake in a tent, caressing the moonlight that drips through the tent shining on the edge of my sleeping bag. The softness of the moonlight

expresses this beautiful moment of melancholy, capturing my unwillingness to depart. It is a night towards the end of my fieldwork. I think about all the places I have stayed during this year—an archive, a courtyard-house, a factory-house and a farm field. In each place, I eventually felt either comfortable or secure being there, as an anthropologist, a migrant worker, and a human being. Was that due to my sense of fulfilment from conducting fieldwork in these places that I might call ‘home’? What is home? I have often wondered, long before I turned to study anthropology on migration and home.

Strolling around my memory, my thoughts wander back to the courtyard-house where I lived for the first thirteen years of my life, dwelling together with our extended family. It was a home containing my happy childhood; a home that had a courtyard where I always played with my siblings; a home that had a black-and-white eighteen-inch TV that attracted tens of neighbours to watch TV series on hot summer evenings; a home where a postman dressed in a green uniform knocked at the door to deliver letters and newspapers almost every day.

Beyond the mundane activities of domestic life, when I think about that home, there were special moments that shaped it and that remain fresh in my memory: moments when our *xianluo fanke*<sup>1</sup> (my grandfather’s siblings) gave us toys (most were ‘high-tech’ ones like a remote control helicopter, robot toys), clothes (usually old ones) and *hongbao* (red paper envelopes containing money as a gift) when they returned home from Thailand every few years. It was great fun to pick up those exotic Thai dresses from piles of old clothing—which always had a strong strange smell of perfume—and try them on. And I was immeasurably pleased to show off and share the toys with my siblings and playmates, felt I almost glowed with happiness. The feeling of ecstasy at those moments is, even now, still fresh for me. However, I remember that I did not like the way they gave me *hongbao* since I had to sing a song for them in order to get the pocket money. Each time they returned home, the *fanke* not only gave children pocket money but also distributed money among their adult relatives. I remember that my grandfather told me that the *fanke* used to send *qiaopi* (letters with remittance) home almost every month long before I was born, at the time when they rarely came back. Each time our whole family saw the *fanke*

---

<sup>1</sup> *Xianluo* is the former name of Thailand (Siam) in Chinese and *fanke* is a common name for Chinese living overseas in Chaoshan dialect; *xianluo fanke* literally means Thai foreign relatives.

off at the airport, I always asked my grandfather: ‘When will the *fanke* come again?’ (As a child, I thought it in the context of receiving new toys). The answer from my grandfather was always: ‘Next time when they return home’. That confused me for years: if here is their home, why they are not at home all the time?

In my memory, I knew that a home could be *you-huaqiao* (with relatives overseas) or *wu-huaqiao* (without relatives overseas)—these were the two terms that adults used to distinguish households locally. As I reached my teenage years, especially after our *xianluo fanke* (my grandfather’s elder brother and elder sister) passed away, the contact with their offspring decreased. At the same time, our family relied less and less on the *fanke* financially as the whole town was involved in industrialisation (light manufacturing) and we ‘benefited’ from it.

In the 1990s, the local government in my hometown started to distribute farmland to agricultural household villagers and encouraged them to build small family-run factories. By then, the locals were separated into two more kinds of household: *kai-gongchang-de* (running a factory) and *wu-kai-gongchang-de* (having no factory). And my home belonged to the *kai-gongchang-de* (running a factory); a home that had noisy machines and made plastic toys.

That started when I was fourteen. We moved into our new house, which had four floors. Properly speaking, it was a factory-house. That was a home where we not only lived together with family but also with workers, a home that was not only a living space but also a manufacturing space. Our family lived on the first and second floors (the third floor was for guests), and the ground floor was used as a toy-making workshop and the workers’ dormitory. It is worth mentioning that a friendship that started from lending books to one of the workers contributed a great part of my memory living in the factory-house. As my imagination moves through the space of the factory-house from the ground floor to the second floor, memories of our friendship flood back to me.

I never knew his name, but everyone called him ‘Xiao Di’ (little brother), as he was the youngest among all of the workers. In 1995, he was seventeen. It was the first time he had left his home village in Hubei province. In order to earn money to pay tuition fees for his younger sister at home, he had dropped out of high school and came to Shantou (approximately 1500 kilometres away from his home village) to look for a factory job.

He was thin and weak. He coughed a lot. Quite often his coughing (from the ground floor) woke me up (on the second floor) in the dead of the night. These sounds penetrated the silence of the night, haunting the air and my mind. I felt that I could sense his loneliness. I felt that I would like to chat with him to share his loneliness. I felt that my heart hurt. But I rarely talked to any migrant workers then; it was as if there were an invisible wall between us. Xiao Di was shy and seemed solitary. He always stayed in a dim corner at lunch breaks, reading on his own while others chatted and laughed. Out of curiosity, I worked up my courage and asked him what books he was reading. From then on, we talked to each other. I shared almost all of my books (including textbooks) with him and he shared lots of stories about his remote village. Our friendship lasted for four years until I moved to Beijing for my university life.

Then I lived in Beijing for six years. During the following ten years, I moved many times: first to Durham, then York, then Philadelphia, then St Andrews, and then Edinburgh. Within these sixteen years, Durham and St Andrews were places somewhere where I felt at home in different ways. Durham was a ‘home’ in which I found that my soul was most peacefully settled. When my imagination moves to Durham, home is more about a feeling than a place—the feeling that my soul is as free as a falling leaf, dancing wildly with the wind. On the days I stayed in Durham, I frequently sensed a ‘truer’ self in my everyday life. Those moments could come from something as simple as staring at the reflection of the Durham Cathedral Tower in the River Wear when a breeze rippled the water’s surface, a warm smile from a local senior at an *Amigos*<sup>2</sup> meeting, or from thinking about the elegant table manners at the college formal dinner. Differently, St Andrews is my ‘intellectual home’. It is my research experience here that accommodates the ‘truer’ self in a reflective way in my academic life, as quite often I can hear my innermost thoughts, from writing for example, which enables me to closely approach my thoughts through the flow of my own words.

My imaginary journey goes on and on as I roam around the memory terrain of my experiences of home, which has accommodated and nurtured both my body and my soul throughout the course of my growth. To me, because of home, time has its trajectory.

Tonight, I am at home in my imagination.

---

<sup>2</sup> *Amigos* is a café where a weekly meeting for international students and friends in Durham takes place.

### Why study home and migration?

Along my life trajectory, moving from a small town to a metropolis, from southern China to the north, from China to England, to America and then Scotland, my wandering heart has always been seeking a home while wondering about ‘what home is’. Can the notion of home be defined in the contemporary world, which is increasingly shaped by mobility? To me, it seems almost impossible to give a definition of home. The question of ‘what is home’ cannot be answered easily for a migrant, at least not in the definitive or the singular. Home could be a family, a feeling, a journey, a song, or a piece of land. Also, asking different questions about home may inspire us to perceive the notion of home differently:

If we ask	{	What is home?	Then	{	Home could be defined as something.
		Which home?			Home could be multiple.
		Where is home?			Home could be located.
		Why home?			Home could be essential.
		Who is home?			Home could be referred to somebody.
		When is home?			Home could be temporal.
		How is home experienced?			Home could vary from moment to moment.
		... ..			... ..

Nurtured by these years of living away from the town where I was born, my understanding of home has changed. The more I move, the more I think about home, and the more I become interested in people’s ideas of home—especially for those who move—and what home means to them. I often think back to our *xianluo fanke* (Thai foreign relatives) who only came back to their courtyard-house every few years. What did home mean to the *fanke* who were only at home in China for a few days a year, or even every other year? How did they experience home away from home in Thailand? Is there any similarity between their experiences of home and mine as I lived in the West during these years? I also frequently recall my teenage years in our factory-house, living with the factory workers, like Xiao Di. As a young migrant worker, how did Xiao Di make sense of his world away from his home? How did he make sense of his life away from his family and village—his lingering coughing at night in a remote city far away from his home, his solitude in corners only with books, his thirst for knowledge but dropping out of school for the sake of his family, or when his mind was filled with village stories



revealing his attachment to his birth-place? Do we need a home to take care of? To be thought of? To be uprooted as well as to be rooted? To return to as well as to leave from? What makes home essential to a human soul, if this assumption holds?

This philosophical impulse eventually brought me to study the anthropology of migration and home, and my personal motivation took me back to my hometown, Chaoshan, to conduct ethnographic fieldwork—through living with migrant workers in an old courtyard-house; working together with them in a toy factory (a factory-house); and conducting research in a local archive, in particular on *fanke*'s remittance family letters (*qiaopi*). This study involves both outgoing labourers (*fanke*), who migrated from Chaoshan in China to Southeast Asia in recent history (1860s to 1970s), and incoming migrant workers (*wailaigong*), who travel to Chaoshan from different parts of China these days (1980s to the present); i.e. both national and international migrations, historical and contemporary. However, in including these two practices of migration my primary aim is not comparing or contrasting them; rather it is to attempt to 'peel off' the individual migrants' socio-cultural or historical 'wrappings' and to explore their ideas of home and the universal human capacity to make home in a variety of ways, based on the understanding of *being migrants*, *being human*.

## The Chaoshan Region

The area of focus in this study is the Chaoshan<sup>3</sup> region in north-eastern Guangdong province, in southern China. The Chaoshan region consists of three cities: *Chaozhou*, *Shantou* and *Jieyang* (see Figure 1). Geographically, Chaoshan faces the Pacific Ocean in the southeast, Fujian province to the northeast, the Phoenix Mountain Range (*Fenghuang*

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<sup>3</sup> The word 'Chaoshan' is used to describe both the language and culture of this region. The Chaoshanese are one of the Chinese Han ethnic groups. They speak the Chaoshan dialect—Teochew. Teochew is a member of the Southern Min language family, one of the major subdivisions of spoken Chinese. As one of the three key dialects spoken in Guangdong province, Chaoshan dialect differs entirely in its phonetic structure from Cantonese (spoken in the Pearl River Delta) and from Hakka (spoken in the mountainous areas) (Chen 2000). Chaoshanese shares a commonly understood 'Chaoshan Culture'. This culture is visibly distinguished in its popular cults and rituals, Chaoshan folklore, opera, music, gongfu tea (a special way of making tea), cuisine, and traditional arts and craft manufacturing, such as chao ceramics and chao embroidery (Ye and Lin 2010).

*Shan*) to the northwest (which sets it apart from the Hakka-speaking region), and the Lotus Flower Mountain Range (*Lianhua Shan*) to the southwest (which forms a natural boundary between Chaoshan and the Cantonese-speaking Pearl River Delta). The two mountain ranges form the uplands and three rivers flow from the northwest to the southeast, dividing Chaoshan into the Han, Rong and Lian river zones. The total size of the Chaoshan region is approximately ten thousand square kilometres and has a resident population of about twelve million (Chen 2006). Although it occupies only one-thousandth of the land area of China, the Chaoshan region has about one percent of the nation's population. The region is more densely populated than many other parts of China.

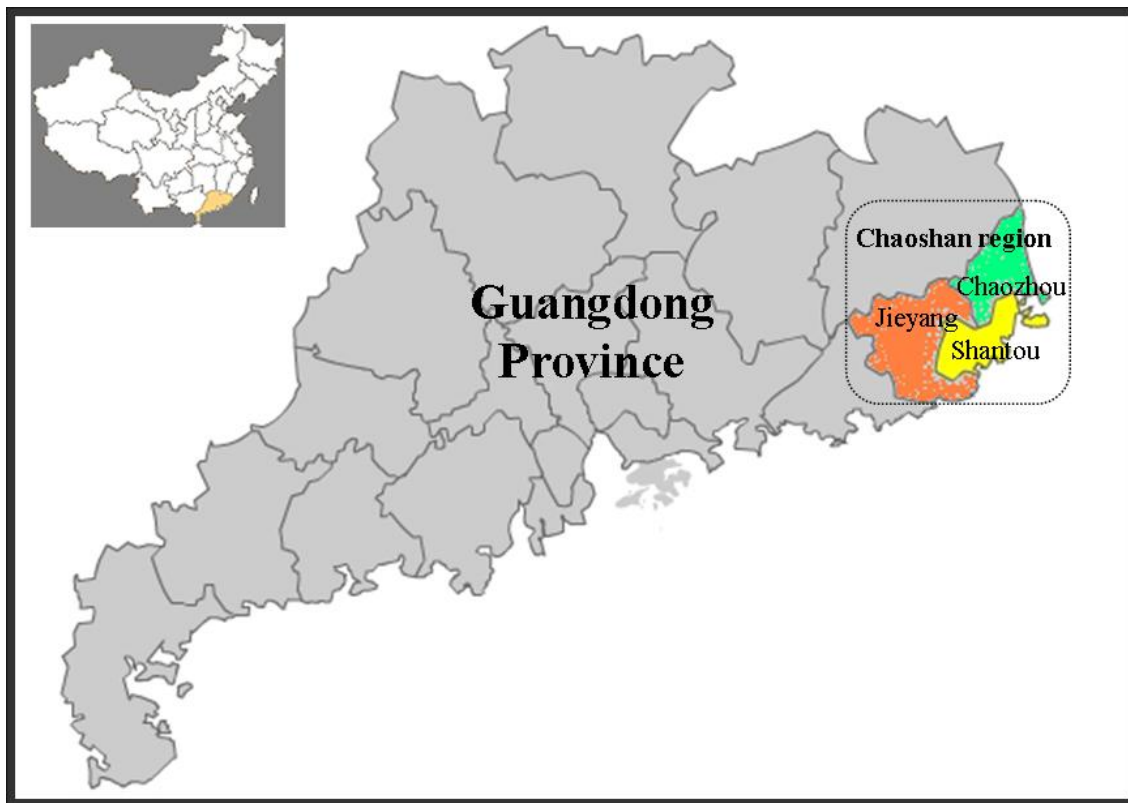


Figure 2 - The Chaoshan Region in Guangdong, China

### **The history of migration in the Chaoshan region**

Migration is one of the central issues among the research literature on Chaoshan history. The first large wave of emigration from Imperial China occurred during the Tang (618 – 907) and Song (960 – 1279) dynasties, when people moved from central China to Fujian province and then migrated further south to the Chaoshan region. These migrants are the ancestors of the modern Chaoshanese (Huang and Chen 2001). Substantial migration from Fujian to the Chaoshan region continued throughout the Yuan and Ming dynasties (1271 – 1644). However, with the development of marine trading during the Qing dynasty (1644 – 1911), some Chaoshanese began to immigrate to Southeast Asia and from there to more distant parts of the world; at the same time, the emigration from Fujian continued (ibid.).

In particular, the opening of *Shantou* as a treaty port in 1860<sup>4</sup> greatly increased the flow of goods and people out of the region. The chaos<sup>5</sup> in China in the late Qing dynasty (1840 – 1911) and the great demand for labour in Southeast Asia during this period resulted in massive Nanyang (Southeast Asia) migration. Millions of people in Guangdong and Fujian provinces left their homeland bound for Thailand, Singapore and Malaysia. One of the major sources of Nanyang migrants was the Chaoshan region<sup>6</sup>. The Piglet Trade,<sup>7</sup> involving export of human labour, ended with the collapse of the Qing dynasty in 1911, but large-scale voluntary labour migration from Chaoshan to Southeast Asia continued until 1949, when the People's Republic of China was founded. This labour emigration from Southern China to Southeast Asia from the mid-nineteenth century to the People's Republic of China before the Reform and opening up (1978) was

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<sup>4</sup> In 1860, Shantou was opened as a treaty port under the Treaty of Tientsin (Tianjin), signed in 1858 between the Chinese Qing government and France, Britain and the United States. Afterwards, it became one of the key ports in China for import and export (Wang, Wang and Qin 1988).

<sup>5</sup> The constant warfare that was a part of the Opium War (1839-42) and the Taiping Rebellion (1851-64) brought famine, poverty and epidemics to China (Voss 2005), which led many Chinese to regard their homeland as a hopeless environment (Wakeman 1966).

<sup>6</sup> According to the Chaoshan *Qiaowu*, there are about ten million Chaoshanese overseas, about 4.9 million of whom are in Thailand (Chen 2009).

<sup>7</sup> From the mid-nineteenth century until 1911, *Zhuzai Maoyi* (Piglet Trade) was a very common phenomenon. It involved a trade of contract labour, driven by the great labour demand in Southeast Asia. The great number of migrants and their poor working conditions in Southeast Asia led to their being labelled 'piglets'; they were not treated as human beings.

called ‘*Xia Nanyang*’<sup>8</sup> (migrating to Southeast Asia) (Chen 2009).

Year	Amount of Migrants to Southeast Asia from Shantou Port	Amount of Migrants to Southeast Asia from Shantou Port Per Year
1869 -1890	740,000	33,636
1891-1900	770,000	77,000
1901-1910	1,070,000	107,000
1911-1920	940,000	94,000
1921-1930	1,330,000	133,000
1931-1939	490,000	54,444
1946-1948	140,000	46,667

Figure 3 - Amount of migrants from Shantou Port to Southeast Asia (Wang, Yang and Chen 2007: 6)

Since the Chinese Economic Reform was initiated in 1978, immigration to Southeast Asia has decreased in the Chaoshan region. The local and central governments of China have made efforts to re-establish relations with overseas Chinese and ‘engage them in the social and economic agendas carried out in the *qiaoxiang*<sup>9</sup> areas’ (Yow 2004: 2). In particular, in order to exploit the strong links between Chaoshan and the great number of overseas Chaoshanese, the Chinese government included *Shantou* as one of the first four Special Economic Zone (SEZ)<sup>10</sup> cities in 1981. Special Economic Zones are intended to entice foreign investors to set up factories manufacturing primarily for export. Light industries producing plastics, toys, foodstuffs, textiles, garments, chemicals, and handicrafts have played an important part in the recent development of Chaoshan. The rise of the manufacturing industry in the area is attracting millions of factory workers

<sup>8</sup> The term ‘*Xia Nanyang*’ combines the word ‘*xia*’, which means travelling south, and ‘*Nanyang*’, which means Southeast Asia.

<sup>9</sup> ‘*Qiaoxiang*’ is a term combining *qiao* (sojourner) and *xiang* (homeland village), which literally means the homeland of sojourners (Zhuang 2000). The history of the Nanyang migration has ‘created’ a large population of *Huaqiao* (Overseas Chinese) in Southeast Asia. Meanwhile, the ancestral homeland of those *Huaqiao*, such as the Chaoshan region, has become *qiaoxiang* area (Wang 2000).

<sup>10</sup> The other three cites are: Shenzhen, Zhuhai and Xiamen. The Special Economic Zones delimit areas where, through exemptions from customs duty, foreign investors are encouraged to set up factories whose finished products are mainly for export.

from all over the country.<sup>11</sup> Instead of large-scale emigration, a new wave of immigration has occurred since the 1990s.

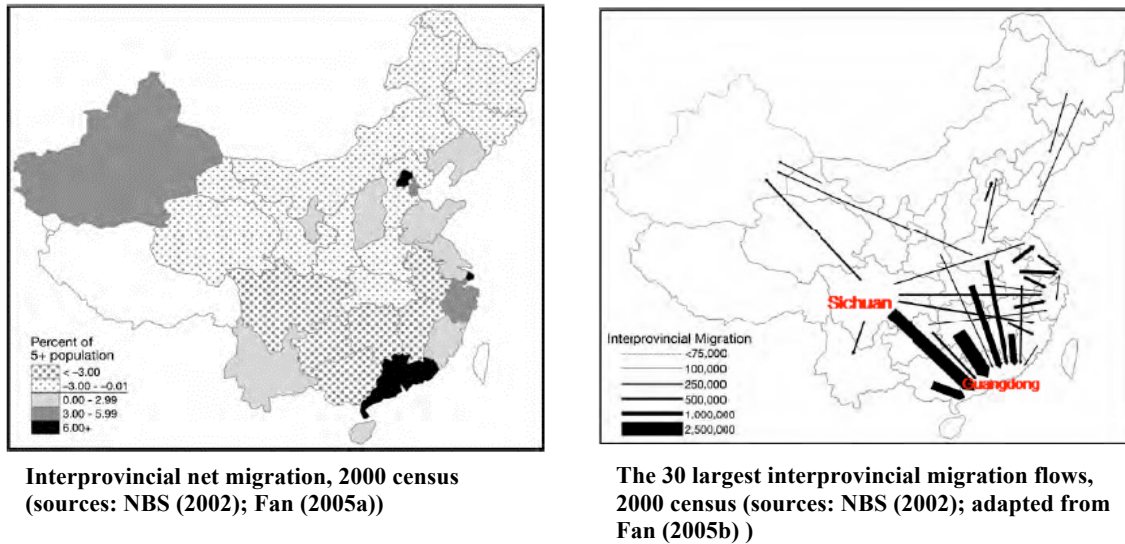


Figure 4 - The rural-urban migration in China

Therefore, to some degree, the history of Chaoshan is the history of migration in China. As a result of the continuing change over time following the rise and fall of different ruling systems, this thesis presents Chaoshan as a migratory region throughout its history. From within this regional and historical context that this project will largely focus on the last two episodes of migration in the Chaoshan region—the historical Nanyang (Southeast Asia) migration and the recent manufacturing workers immigration (see the starred section in Figure 5).

Year	Immigration	Emigration
4000 B.C. – 3500 B.C.	No clear evidence	Archaeological evidence has suggested that Chenqiao ren in Chaoshan was one possible origin of the Austronesian culture of the Pacific islands.

<sup>11</sup> Guangdong province is the leading destination province for the rural-urban migration in China (Fan 2008: 36), and Shantou City in Guangdong established its reputation for plastic products manufacturing in the last decade. Large numbers of peasant migrant workers from other provinces of China have made a significant contribution to the rise of manufacturing in Shantou.

After 111 B.C.	Small number of immigrants started to move to the Chaoshan region from other parts of China.	No clear evidence
Tang and Song dynasties (618 – 1279)	The first large immigration from central China to Fujian and then to the Chaoshan region.	No clear evidence
Yuan and Ming dynasties (1271 – 1644)	Large migration from Fujian to the Chaoshan region continually	No clear evidence
Early and middle Qing dynasty (1644 – 1850s)	Continuing immigration from Fujian	Small-scale emigration to Southeast Asia mainly for overseas trade.
<i>*From late Qing dynasty to the People's Republic of China before the Reform and Opening-up (1860s – 1978)</i>	No clear evidence	<i>Large-scale emigration to Southeast Asia (Xia Nanyang).</i>
<i>*After the Reform and Opening-up (1980s – Present)</i>	<i>Manufacturing worker immigration from other provinces all over China</i>	No clear evidence

Figure 5 - The migration history of Chaoshan (Source: *The History of Chaoshan*, by Huang and Chen 2001)

### Previous key anthropological research conducted in the Chaoshan region

One of the earliest ethnographic accounts of Chaoshan, as well as one of the earliest ethnographies of Han peasantry society in rural China, is that of Daniel Harrison Kulp, an American sociologist who conducted anthropological and sociological fieldwork in Phoenix Village in the Chaoshan Region in the 1920s. Kulp's (1925) book, *Country Life in South China: The Sociology of Familism. Volume 1, Phoenix village, Kwantung China*, records details of the village, such as its economy, population, families, religious and educational conditions, and community organization. Freedman (1958: 93) highlights the significance of this account as 'the fullest source of the study of the topic in south-eastern China'. As one of the pioneering works of Sinological analysis, Kulp's work has been heavily cited by subsequent anthropological studies in South China, such as Freedman's (1958, 1966, 1970, 1979) study of Chinese lineage in Guangdong and Fujian and Cohen's (1968, 1976) work on Hakka people in Guangdong as well as the Chinese family in Taiwan. Relevant to my project on migration to and from the Chaoshan region

is Kulp's (1925) observation of a growing tendency for the Phoenix villagers to migrate abroad during his fieldwork in 1920s. Kulp also notes that many villagers who migrated to Thailand had never returned.

Another important piece of scholarship on Chaoshan was done by Chen Da (1939), *Emigrant Communities in South China: A Study of Overseas Migration and its Influence on Standards of Living and Social Change*. With a more systematic analysis of the migration tendency in the area than in Kulp's account, Chen argues that most of the Nanyang migrants returned to their homeland in China twice, once to get married and then finally to 'retire'. He also discusses the phenomenon of the so-called 'dual family system' [which I will address in Chapter Two] for the first time, which inspired subsequent research by a number of scholars (Bao 2003). Through rich descriptions of nearly all aspects of Chinese life both at home and overseas (including family size, family income, family consumption, patterns of marriage, health and medical practices, and even religious beliefs), Chen's book offers significant material on the causes and effects of Chinese emigration and contributes to the body of knowledge on migration, acculturation, and Chinese society.

More than half a century later, there was a follow-up study of Kulp's (1925) early account, *Changes of Phoenix Village: Re-study of Daniel Kulp's Phoenix Village*, conducted by anthropologist Zhou Daming (2006). Using theories and methods of cultural change, Zhou focuses on rural urbanisation and describes the transformations that have taken place since Kulp's work in 1920s. In contrast to what Kulp experienced in the 1920s, Zhou argues that there was no obvious emigration to Southeast Asia in the 1990s.

In the last three decades, with fewer and fewer Chaoshan people migrating to Southeast Asia and with the rise of the manufacturing industry in the area which has attracted more and more labour workers, academic research has also gradually shifted its focus from the international Nanyang (Southeast Asia) migration to the rural-urban migration within China.<sup>12</sup> The most recent sociological and anthropological key work conducted in the Chaoshan region is *Gender, Modernity and Male Migrant Workers in China: Becoming a 'Modern' Man*, written by Xiaodong Lin (2013). Within the context

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<sup>12</sup> Most anthropological studies on the rural-urban migration in cotemporary China have been conducted in metropolises such as Beijing, Shenzhen or Shanghai (e.g. Pun 2005; Xiang 2005; Yan 2008).

of China's urbanisation and modernisation, Lin carefully examines the formation of Chinese male migrant workers' identity and the gender politics of Chinese men and masculinities. A crucial insight from Lin's work is that, by fully using the male migrants' own narratives, it is possible to challenge the dominant assumption that places the migrants within a 'victim' or 'failure' position in regard to adopting a modern urban identity and lifestyle.

## The Chinese Idea of Home

In Chinese, family and home are one word, *jia* (家). The Chinese character *jia*, '家', is a combination of '宀', a roof of a house and '豕', a pig. The character implies that family members living together under the over-arching roof, with a pig as the metaphor for security of meat supply and the prosperity of a home, having transited from the fishing and hunting age to the agricultural period.

Among the key anthropological research from the decades of study done in China (including Taiwan and Hong Kong<sup>13</sup>), very little has explicitly focused on the topic of home. Rather, *the* 'traditional' Chinese idea of home has been addressed in relation to relevant topics, mainly regarding home and family (e.g. Bray 2005; Cohen 1976, 1992, 2005; Wolf 1968, 1972), home and dwelling (e.g. Feuchtwang 1974; Knapp and Lo 2005), and home and the lineage model (e.g. Baker 1968; Faure 1989; Freedman 1958, 1979; Ho 2005; Potter 1970; Watson 1975).

Myron L. Cohen's (1976, 1992) studies on Chinese family tell us about the 'reproduction' of home in terms of family division. For the Chinese, a home (*jia*) can be divided into two or more smaller homes through the equal distribution of family holdings among brothers—*fenjia* (Cohen 1992: 357). Addressing making and maintaining a home, Margery Wolf's (1968) work on a Chinese farm family emphasises the importance of gender roles among family members while filial piety and family hierarchy are also

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<sup>13</sup> During the Maoist period, because anthropology as a discipline was banned in China together with a ban on foreign anthropologists conducting research in Mainland China, most anthropological research on the Chinese society was conducted in Hong Kong or Taiwan, as well as some in Southeast Asia.



crucial. Wolf's (1972) other classic work examines how rural Taiwanese women gained power and happiness in a social structure dominated by men through bearing children to create their own 'uterine family'. Francesca Bray's (2005) work, included in an edited volume *House, Home, Family: Living and Being Chinese* (Knapp and Lo 2005), also addresses women's 'temporary' roles (born into one family and married into another) within the patrilineal family in late imperial China, and examining how they gained power and authority within the inner quarters of their courtyard homes.

*House, Home, Family: Living and Being Chinese*, edited by Ronald G. Knapp and Kai-Yin Lo (2015), is one of the rare books over the decades to explicitly address the traditional Chinese house and practices of dwelling in it, as well as architectural, cultural, and historical renditions on the polysemy of the Chinese word *jia* (home and/or family). In the book, Knapp (2005) explains how *Fengshui* (Chinese geomancy)—on which a more systematic study has been conducted by Stephan Feuchtwang (1974), *An Anthropological Analysis of Chinese Geomancy*—plays an essential role in siting and situating homes and in traditional Chinese dwellings. 'The application of *fengshui* [...] reveals not only a sensitivity to recurring patterns of nature [...] but also the *self-conscious* ways in which people give shape to space' (Knapp 2005: 5). Puay-peng Ho (2005), another contributor to the book, scrutinises common ancestral halls and argues that they affirm a common lineage beyond the separated home units, and 'make manifest the expansive nature of the "family", helping to consolidate and reinforce the lineage structure while recognizing the fundamental family unit, whether conjugal, stem, or joint family, as its multiple nuclei' (Jervis 2005: 232). Ho's finding is not new to Chinese lineage studies; much more in-depth anthropological studies on the same subject were conducted over the 'functionalist period'.<sup>14</sup>

Whether they concern family structure and management, *the* 'traditional' Chinese house and dwelling, or the Chinese lineage model, these works are of great significance as they lay a foundation for better understanding *the* 'traditional' Chinese society and the Chinese idea of home as its 'sub-culture'. China, however, is 'an old country, [that] has embraced new social and cultural values and has become a country eager for change'.

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<sup>14</sup> Classic works such as *Lineage Organization in Southeastern China* by Maurice Freedman (1958), *Sheung Shui: A Chinese Lineage Village* by Hugh Baker (1968), and *Emigration and the Chinese Lineage* by James Watson (1975).

Kai-Yin Lo (2005: 202-203) vividly and metaphorically exemplifies this in detailing ‘the exchange of a finely made antique wooden chair for a new, upholstered sofa’ in her work on the changing ways of furnishing a Chinese home.

With the political storms that the Chinese have been weathering over the century, as well as the economic storms over the last three decades, the new realities of life in China have been challenging and altering many aspects of *the* ‘traditional’ Chinese society and family life. In particular, ‘[m]odernization, globalization, individualization, and social and spatial mobility are restratifying Chinese society in ways fundamentally different from the past’ (Pieke 2014: 128). ‘[I]ndividuals, families and communities create a dizzying and ever-shifting array of lifestyles and identities’ (ibid.: 129). Can these highly diverse lifestyles and identities (of individuals, families, and communities) still be explained by, and be ‘framed’ into, those traditional modes of structure, whether in terms of the Chinese lineage model, the mode of the ‘uterine family’ or the courtyard home system?

We can find the answer ‘no’ from two key research findings. Based on his study of family division, Cohen’s (2005) recent work traces changes in agricultural residential patterns, the size of the family unit, and forms of dwelling due to modern technology and economic developments, which have changed the nature of *fenjia* (family division). He thought-provokingly states that due to the declining birth rates in contemporary China, the absence of more than one son may ‘finally spell the end of the *jia* as a structure of social and moral relationships’ (ibid.: 257). With a similar argument but a different approach, Yunxiang Yan (2003, 2005) explores the close relationship between the changing form of dwellings and new forms of family units and private life. Accompanying the decline of the courtyard-house dwelling and the size of the family unit, as Yan (2005: 394) clearly points out, is the reality that ‘[i]n everyday life the horizontal conjugal tie has replaced the vertical parent-son relationship as the central axis of family relations’. Cohen’s point and Yan’s argument speak to each other; both indicate the ‘moral crisis’ of filial piety and the change in family hierarchy.

Over recent decades, modernisation (e.g. Harrell 2001), individualisation (e.g. Yan 2005), as well as social and spatial mobility (Chan and Pun 2009; Cho 2013; Woronov 2011) in China have had significant impact on traditional form of dwelling for Chinese

family and on the size of the family unit. This is especially obvious in the context of the rural-urban migration in China. Hundreds of millions of rural migrants have moved to the cities in the continuing search for economic survival, for family, and for a better future.

However, because of the limitations imposed by the household registration system, *hukou*<sup>15</sup>, most of them do not have the rights (to housing, health care or children's schooling) that permanent urban residents enjoy. Under the *hukou* system,<sup>16</sup> residents are classed either as 'agricultural' or 'non-agricultural'. Those in the first category may have little social protection and limited access to the resources of the city. For example, without an urban *hukou*, people cannot legally apply for permanent jobs in cities or towns, while without an official job offer, rural residents cannot change their *hukou* from rural to urban (Wang, 2005). More specifically, as Wang (ibid) points out, without a *hukou* in a city, a rural migrant cannot enjoy the host of benefits brought by urban residence: subsidies in medical care, housing, job training, and social welfare programs. His or her children cannot go to state schools in cities for the compulsory state-subsidized education. As a result, families are often split—not living any longer with the family together under the overarching roof, as '家' denotes—with 'left-behind' children remaining in the rural home and older people to take care of them.

The changing realities of life in contemporary China have also been reshaping the anthropology of modern China (Pieke 2009). The rural-urban migration has been a subject of prolific research in the social sciences in the last two decades and a major part of the anthropology of modern China. Key ethnographic accounts addressing rural migrants' experience in urban China include, for example, Biao Xiang's (2005) in-depth examination of the impact of rural-urban migration on state-society relationships through

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<sup>15</sup> A *hukou*, a household registration record officially identifies a person as a resident of an area and includes the classification of individuals as 'agricultural' or 'non-agricultural' citizens, known as the '*hukou leibie*' (the 'status' or type of *hukou* registration). It also includes information such as name, parents, spouse, and date of birth.

<sup>16</sup> The *hukou* (household registration) system is one of the key tools of population control and management in China (Cheng and Selden 1994; Wang 2005). According to Fei-ling Wang (2005), the *hukou* system, as a major component of China's institutional framework, has a very long history that dates back 2,000 years, when the government used it as a way to collect taxes and determine who served in the army. In 1958, Mao Zedong's Communist regime revived it to keep poor rural farmers from flooding into the cities, and it was formalised as a permanent system and used from that time. Despite significant modifications in the early 1980s, the system remains largely unchanged today (Chan and Zhang 1999). This system is an administrative mechanism for collecting and managing information on citizens' personal identification, kinship, and legal residence. In addition, it has its own unique missions: 'administrative control of internal migration, management of temporary residents' (Wang 2005: 63).

the story of *Zhejiangcun*, one of the largest migrant communities in Beijing; Li Zhang's (2001) detailed ethnographic account, *Strangers in the City: Reconfigurations of Space, Power, and Social Networks Within China's Floating Population*, which has a different focus, and analyses the ongoing process of *Zhejiangcun*'s construction, destruction, and reconstruction; Tamara Jacka's (2005) *Rural Women in Urban China: Gender, Migration, and Social Change*, about migrants' experience in Beijing, emphasising gender and social change in contemporary China; and Ngai Pun's (2005) work, *Made in China: Women Factory Workers in a Global Workplace* on resistance and transgression for *dagongmei* (working girls) in the city of Shenzhen. Similarly, through the lens of gender, Hairong Yan's (2008) *New Masters, New Servants: Migration, Development, and Women Workers in China* presents migrant women workers' collective longing and struggle; they are subjected to a range of neoliberal discourses about development, modernity, consumption, and self-worth. A more recent one, from Jaesok Kim (2013), focuses on class, ethnicity, and productivity on Chinese labour in a Korean factory.

Nevertheless, none of this research has directly addressed rural migrants' experiences in the cities in relation to their understanding of home—what home means to them and in turn, how it is affected by their lives in the cities. Among these studies, the notion of home has been accorded not even a marginal analytic role. But, I would argue, home, as one of the central concepts of human social life is important for anthropological research, especially in work on migration.

In the level of individual experience, how rural migrants experience the changes (of dwelling form and size of family unit) are far more complicated (and rich) than the simple prophecy that it may be the 'end' of *jia* (home) being as a structure of social and moral relationships (Cohen 2005), or the neatly 'replacement' from the vertical parents-son relationship to the horizontal conjugal tie (Yan 2005). This complication is not just due to the diversity of individual experiences of home within this transition, but, more importantly, it is about individuals' constant struggle with the 'moral crisis' and the 'replacement' (from the vertical parents-son relationship to the horizontal conjugal tie). How do the Chinese, especially the rural migrants, experience *jia* (home) when it no longer necessarily involves a family living together under the same roof? How does their experience of being away from home in the cities affect their feelings concerning home,

their sense of self and belonging? And in turn, how does their understanding of home affect their ways of making home? Between leaving and returning home, how do rural migrants possess (or how are they possessed by) their sense of being-in-the-world in the cities?

An examination of these questions is central to understanding the complicated, rich and/or even contradictory individual experience of home. These are the key questions that I explore in this thesis. Furthermore, to deepen my research with a historical depth, in addition to investigating the rural migrants' experience of home in urban China, I also explore the historical Nanyang (Southeast Asia) migrants' ideas of home and their ways of home-making through my archival research of their *qiaopi* family letters. Similarly to most of the rural migrants in cities in contemporary China, the historical Nanyang migrants also experienced family separation in their sojourning life, with older people and 'left-behind' children remaining in their hometown in China.

## **The Thesis' Focus and Approach**

This thesis focuses on individuals' experience of home and home-making. The discussion will draw mainly from the migrants' perspectives but does not exclude the locals' perspectives. To study the two different strands of Chinese migration, the historical Nanyang migration and the contemporary rural-urban migration, this thesis takes a different approach from previous anthropological approaches to migration.

Early anthropological approaches to the study of migration are associated with modernisation theory<sup>17</sup>, dependency theory<sup>18</sup>, and then articulation theory<sup>19</sup>. Regardless

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<sup>17</sup> Inspired by Robert Redfield's early work on rural-urban migration in the 1930s, anthropological approaches to labour migration are closely tied to urban studies and modernisation theory. One underlying assumption of modernisation theory is that people move from areas that lack capital but have abundant labour to areas that are rich in capital but short of labour. Modernisation theory proposes that migrants facilitate the diffusion of modern cultural, social, and technological traits from cities back to countryside and that this causes both cities and rural areas to develop (Redfield 1941). Grounded in the theory of political economy and the impact of global capitalism, as Ted C. Lewellen (2002: 132) points out, modernisation theory was 'based on a dualist model that contrasted traditional and modern, and maintained the belief in an unilinear evolution toward a better world through industrialisation, technological development, education, entrepreneurial values, and democracy'. Thus, modernisation theory implies that migration leads to a more equitable balance between resources and population pressure (Redfield 1941).

of the type of the theory used, however, the above analyses on migration focus not on the individuals involved in the process but the apparently emerging patterns. In other words, the issue of labour migration has tended to be analysed as a phenomenon of institution or social structure, rather than through the dimensions of individual intentionality and experience. Only more recently, accompanied by the wave of ‘Writing Culture’<sup>20</sup> in the late 1980s, postmodern anthropology proposed the rejection of a grand theoretical truth, manifested in the studies of migration, as it focused on migrants’ meaningful experiences themselves (e.g. Ahmed 1999; Behar 2007; Gardner 1995, 2002; Grønseth 2013; Jackson 1995; Olwig 1993; Rapport 2012; Stoller 2002; Wardle 2005) rather than attempting to develop an overarching theory to address the issue.

Insofar as migration is defined by being absent from one’s original home, this movement creates the space for a migrant to consider and reconsider the notion of home, and thus construct and reconstruct home through his or her everyday lived experience of the migratory journey. Hence, through the lens of migration, anthropologists are able to focus on and investigate individuals’ ideas of home from a unique perspective. While contextualising migrants within specific social relations, my research into labour migration focuses on individuals’ experiences—in particular their experiences of home and making home away from home. I am less keen to identify possible ‘new social structures’ than to explore how participants construe their individual experiences as meaningful. I leave open the questions of the ways and extents to which a specific social structure emerges through these diverse interpretive processes. I would like to use Rapport’s prescient phrasing to express this pursuit more precisely:

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Bearing in mind such roots, it is not surprising that modernisation theory developed in close connection with the structural functionalism that dominated anthropology until the 1960s.

<sup>18</sup> In the 1960s and 1970s, several urban ethnographies demonstrated that besides bringing development to cities, migration also increases urban poverty (Lomnitz 1977), for example through the creation of shantytowns, which emerge when migrants in the city are marginalised and isolated from the modern sector within slums (Lewellen 2002). In contrast to the modernisation theory view that migration diffuses modernisation from cities to rural areas, dependency theory argues that net economic value flows from rural areas to the cities and thus promotes the ‘de-development of peripheral areas’, because economic surplus and human capital were drained from the countryside (Chilcote 1981).

<sup>19</sup> In the early 1980s, articulation theory, originally formulated by Marxist anthropologists, was developed as a major post-dependency perspective (Kearney 1986). Rejecting both modernisation and dependency theories, articulation theory argues that non-capitalist modes of production are often preserved and even brought into being by integration with capitalism by migration between these two polar types (Meillassoux 1981).

<sup>20</sup> In anthropology, the ‘writing culture debate’ developed from Clifford Geertz’s *The Interpretation of Culture* (1973), and reached its peak in the late 1980s with three postmodernist texts: *Writing Culture* edited by James Clifford and George Marcus (1986), *Anthropology as Cultural Critique* by George Marcus and Michael Fischer (1986), and *Work and Lives* by Clifford Geertz (1988).

It might be the core of an anthropological science, I would suggest, to give a comparative account of individuals' meaningful experiences: the experiences situationally accrued and the meanings ongoingly construed by particular individuals in one moment or milieu (and the consequences of these experiences and meanings for the course of individuals' lives) as against those accrued and construed in others. (Rapport 2002: 9)

Or, using Jackson's words from *The Wherewithal of Life: Ethics, Migration, and the Question of Well-Being*:

Although the notion of the human subject is construed very differently in different societies and through the history of European thought, it is in the experience of persons—not of groups, animals, or things—that the world makes its appearance, albeit fragmentarily and fleetingly. The whole world does not exist for anyone. It is an idea. What exists are worlds within worlds, and the more we penetrate these microcosms, the more we come to question the generalizations we make concerning the hegemony of the macrocosm, whether this is conceived historically, culturally, or ethnically. It is therefore the indeterminate relationship, the lack of fit, the existential aporias between a person and the world in which he or she exists that become the focus of our anthropological concern. (Jackson 2013: 24)

The approach I adopt in this thesis follows a similar model to that of Rapport and Jackson. It pursues, through anthropological lens, 'a comparative account of individuals' meaningful experiences'. As Rapport's (2002) statement also suggests, I explore 'individuals' various meaningful experiences [...] in one moment or milieu'. Scrutinising momentary experience involves the anthropologist in his or her own interpretive analysis construing the meaning-making—which may be fleeting, fluid, or unsettled—of individual informants. Particularly, 'moments of being' (Woolf 1976, cited in Rapport 1994a: 163) will be a key device in this thesis as a whole, deployed ontologically—the

individual moment of being as a way of being in the world, epistemologically—the moment of being as a way of knowing, and methodologically—the moment of being as a way of writing ethnography, which I will elaborate in what follows.

### **Why moments of being?**

Here is a conversation I had with my supervisor, Professor Nigel Rapport after I returned to the university (after doing the fieldwork):

**Shuhua:** I have found that my notes are kind of messy; all the ‘data’ seems to be about ‘home’ but there also seems to be nothing about ‘home’.

**Nigel:** No hurry. Let the notes speak to you...

So, I spent two weeks ‘waiting’ for my field notes to talk to me. For the last two weeks, I had held them in my hands, brought them with me to my office, to the café (where I usually write), to bed. I stayed with my data incessantly day and night. But they seemed reluctant ‘to talk to me’. It seemed that the ‘physical closeness’ in turn set up a ‘cognitive barrier’ in regard to me getting to know them—I was too eager to find a way to write them up and that left no space for them to ‘breathe’ and to exist as themselves, so there was no space for them ‘to talk to me’ or to show me the way. I found that I was not ‘living’ with them ‘respectfully’.

I had thumbed through every single page of my field notes, and tried to sort them out *using theories*. For instance, reviewing pages on living in the old courtyard-house, I thought about how early anthropologists (especially structural anthropologists) approached home based on their ‘structural analysis’ of the house’s physical structure and interior layout, linking spatial layout to tensions in kinship (e.g. Bourdieu 1970, 1977; Cunningham 1964; Humphrey 1974); I thought about the material-cultural approach in examining home, for example, the importance of material objects acting as symbolic means and vehicles to express ideas about home (Pink 2004); or, addressing home-making through consumption (Miller 2001, 2008). I also thought about the more recent phenomenological approach to home, such as work on the perceptual (primarily auditory) dimension of the Dayak longhouse and sociality (Helliwell 1996). But I felt it was somehow ‘violent’ dealing with my ‘data’ in any of those ways—putting them into certain theoretical frameworks before I wrote about them.



So I mixed all of my field notes up and then attempted to sort them out *using themes*. I thought about themes in relation to home, namely, buildings and dwellings (e.g. Heidegger 1971; Ingold 1995; Oliver 1987), and belonging, identity and emplacement (e.g. Fortier 1999, 2002; Rapport and Dawson 1998; Rapport and Williksen 2010). But I failed again, since what my ‘data’ showed me were *momentary experiences of home* which were fleeting and highly-diverse. My informants’ ideas of home did not exist as a theoretical form nor could they be steadily phrased using themes; rather, they varied from one individual to another, even within one individual, they might vary from one moment to another. I mixed them up once more.

Eventually, I locked them in a drawer. Following the suggestion of my other supervisor, Dr Stephanie Bunn, a list came out right after my mind had gone through my whole fieldwork from the beginning to the end, with my eyes closed, lying in bed, at midnight.

Here is another conversation two weeks later with Nigel:

**Shuhua:** I’ve made a list.

I passed the piece of paper to Nigel.

**Nigel:** A list? Good!

**Nigel:** So, on the list are all of the important moments [to you] during the fourteen months?

Nigel asked me after reading the list.

**Shuhua:** Yes! To me, but also important to my informants...

So, I began to write these moments on the list. That was the very point at which I started the ‘voyage’ of writing my thesis, to explore the ‘ocean’ of my fieldwork experience based on a compass map mainly composed of these moments as key knots. It was when I started to write this list of moments that I was able to climb out of the pile of fieldwork data, derived from multiple interviews, archival research, participant observation, ethnographic filming and sound recording, ‘release myself’ from the ‘control’ of any theoretical framework, and eventually move on to the analysis, of each one, and of all of them. Nevertheless, *life is not lived and experienced by themes, one follows another, but by moment by moment.*

But, how could the list enable my fieldwork data to be theoretically illuminated as an anthropological project? How could it be organised in a coherent way that made sense as an ethnographic project?—I asked myself. The way in which we (including my informants and myself) experience home and make home in ‘moments of being’ (Woolf 1976: 70) is the answer.

### **Moment of being as theoretical and methodological approach**

The English writer Virginia Woolf was the first to use the phrase ‘moments of being’ in her unpublished work *A Sketch of the Past* (written between 1939 and 1940), which was later published in 1976 together with her other autobiographical writing as a collection named *Moments of Being*. Rather than providing any definition, Woolf first contrasts moments of being with what she calls moments of ‘non-being’:

These separate moments of being were however embedded in many more moments of non-being. I have already forgotten what Leonard and I talked about at lunch; and at tea; although it was a good day the goodness was embedded in a kind of nondescript cotton wool. This is always so. A great part of every day is not lived consciously. One walks, eats, sees things, deals with what has to be done... (Woolf 1976: 70)

Woolf continues to explain what she means by moments of being through giving a few instances from her own experience. Here is one of them, as she describes it:

I was fighting with Thoby on the lawn. We were pummelling each other with our fists. Just as I raised my fist to hit him, I felt: why hurt another person? I dropped my hand instantly, and stood there, and let him beat me. I remember the feeling. It was a feeling of hopeless sadness. It was as if I became aware of something terrible; and of my own powerlessness. I slunk off alone, feeling horribly depressed. (Woolf 1976: 71)

Contrary to the ‘nondescript’ forgotten states of ‘non-being’ in which the rush of

everyday life typically passes, the moment of being that Woolf vividly describes is conscious while memorable to her. Experiencing such a moment of ontologically exquisite awareness, she intensely sensed the juxtaposition of the ‘I then’ and the ‘I now’ (ibid.: 75): *I (as well as others) took for granted the rights to fight back when being attacked before but now I want to renounce the rights.* In other words, within that moment, she was suddenly conscious of her ontology, and temporally made sense of her existence, even making sense of her standing still and letting herself be beaten.

Epistemologically, at the moment when Woolf raised her fist, ready to hit her brother Thoby, she experienced a flash of self-awareness—‘why hurt another person?’. This momentary experience was a revolutionary realisation as well as a discovery to Woolf herself—‘it was as if I became aware of something terrible,’ she wrote. Hence, her moment of being served as a way of knowing as it opened up a hidden reality for her—‘it is or will become a revelation of some order; it is a token of some real thing behind appearances’ (ibid.: 72), she explained. Within the moment of being, there is an epistemological intensity to her, as she continues:

[T]hat behind the cotton wool is hidden a pattern; that we—I mean all human beings—are connected with this; that the whole world is a work of art; that we are parts of the work of art....And I see this when I have a shock. (ibid.)

Instrumentally, through the act of writing down the momentary experience, Woolf found the (best) way to express herself, as she stated that such a shock-receiving capacity is what makes her a writer—‘I make it real by putting it into words. It is only by putting it into words that I make it whole’ (ibid.).

Important as they were to Woolf, such individual moments of being may also be significant for me, for my informants, for migrants and probably for anyone. After all, a kind of ontological and epistemological intensity also happened to me and to my informants as we momentarily glimpsed ‘truths’—at least personal truths, though they may be temporal—hidden behind the opaque surface of everyday life—or ‘patterns’ behind the ‘cotton wool’ of daily life (ibid.). Over the course of my fieldwork, moments

when I was fully conscious of my experience while interacting with my informants often led me to a better understanding of issues that confused me. Sometimes, with a ‘shock’, I experienced a moment of being opened up to a subversive reality that gave me a completely different point of view in regard to perceiving my research subjects, especially in terms of their ideas of home and the ways in which they make home. Moreover, basing my work within individuals’ singular experience, I found that truths (maybe personal) of which I (or my informants) glimpsed from those moments of being might reveal connections, one with the other or with one’s own world. Like a connecting rod, moments of being could be the very interface where experiences of different individuals abut, which may also link the unique personal experience with our shared human nature.

Each of those flashes of awareness, whether they were triggered by walking, street cries, a teardrop, or a single line from a family letter, contributed to my comprehension both of myself and my research subjects, and this was usually ‘followed by the desire to explain it’ (ibid.). Therefore, knowing things through the moments eventually shaped my writing style for this thesis: to represent the ethnographic and anthropological knowledge moment by moment. In short, the moments of being on the list—those I most remembered from my fieldwork—will be deployed in this thesis ontologically, epistemologically and methodologically.

Here is the list:

1. A moment of being from a walk in Bomaqiao (Shuhua)
2. A moment of being from hearing a street cry (Shuhua)
3. A moment of being in tasting home-cooked food (Yang Cui and Shuhua)
4. A moment of being in the past in receiving *qiaopi* (Grandma Chang)
5. Moments of being in being a sojourner (Zeng)
6. Moments of being in writing *qiaopi*, making home (Zeng and other Nanyang migrants)
7. A moment of being at home in the world (Zeng and Shuhua)
8. A moment of being with the memory of reuniting (Grandma Chang)
9. A moment of being while littering (Yang Cui)
10. A moment of being when packing for home (Xiao Bin)

11. Moments of being in a factory house (factory workers and factory owner)
12. Moments of being while gambling (Yang Cui and other factory workers)
13. A moment of being when a toilet was blocked (Yang Cui and other factory workers)
14. A moment of being in living parallel-lives (Mei Dajie and other migrants)
15. A moment of being in narrating a dream (Yang Cui)
16. Moments of being in making self while making home (Yang Cui and other migrants)

Most of these moments were so ordinary and yet were remembered by me or emphasised by my informants. There were various ways in which I discovered those were moments for my informants: some came to me straightforwardly from their emphasis either in the form of storytelling or inscribed on letter papers (*qiaopi* archives); while some moments were rather hidden, wrapped by a momentary silence, pause or a fleeting a facial expression. For each of the moments of being, it is not the nature of ‘doing something’ that counts but the intensity of feeling when it happens: one is fully conscious of walking, hearing, shopping, writing, littering, packing, narrating, and so on.

Besides, since moments of being are intrinsically individually owned, a certain experience can be extraordinary for one individual but mundane to another. A walk in Bomaqiao could easily be hidden behind the ‘cotton wool’ of daily life for a migrant worker, but for me, the experience was intense and vivid.

Moreover, as instances of individuals’ heightened consciousness, in terms of duration, moments of being can be just fleeting seconds—such as when Yang Cui threw a plastic bag [this will be elaborated in Chapter Three]—or can last as long as the whole course of the fieldwork experience to an anthropologist. It is ‘a viewing of the times of one’s life from across an experiential boundary, from another time’ (Rapport 2014: 420). In short, as Rapport puts it, ‘to make a moment is to view one interaction, one holiday, one generation, status or identity, from another’ (ibid). That is, it is moments that make moments; we experience one moment of being from another such moment.

## Thesis Outline

The thesis is divided into five chapters, as well as having an introduction and a conclusion. After introducing my project initiative, the fieldwork and theoretical and methodological approach (moments of being) of the project in the **Introduction**, **Chapter One** invites you to my research field site. I approach this field site (Bomaqiao village) by walking in its *landscape*, listening to its *soundscape*, tasting from its *foodscape*, and traversing its *timescape* in the process of trying to understand what it means to me and to the migrants, what it tells us and how it tells us. It is these four ‘scapes’—landscape, soundscape, foodscape, and timescape—that construct my understanding of the field site.

The following four chapters, from Chapter Two to Chapter Five, are devoted to the exploration of migrants’ diverse ways of making home. The four chapters are organised simply according to the four main locations of my fieldwork: After my first few weeks with Chen Ma and Chen Ba, I conducted my two-month *qiaopi* archival research (Chapter Two) while staying with some migrant workers (my key informants, Yang Cui and Xiao Bin) in an old courtyard-house (Chapter Three). After I finished my *qiaopi* archival research, I followed my informants to the factory (Shunxin Toy Factory) where they worked, and managed to work there with them for about one year (Chapter Four). Finally, in the last few months of my fieldwork, I often visited and camped overnight in a farm field with a fortune-telling lodge (Chapter Five), which many migrant workers visited.

Beneath this chapter outline are the moments of being that, as with the above four ‘scapes’, continue to play an essential role in constructing the whole thesis. These moments capture the home-making, of various kinds, that migrants practice everyday, both behavioural and ideational. That is, each chapter is also thematically constructed by case studies or analyses of certain ‘Woolfian’ moments of being.

**Chapter Two** invites you to the historical Nanyang migration and its legacy *qiaopi*. Within the enormous landscape of *qiaopi*, I zoom-in to scrutinise a small subset of *qiaopi* that were written and sent by a migrant—110 pieces of *qiaopi* from a Nanyang migrant (Zeng). Through exploring relationships between the migrant and his family members,

which were thoroughly expressed within the *qiaopi*, I discuss the notion of home, particularly for the Nanyang migrants and I argue that the very moments of writing family letters and sending remittance home were ways of making (and unmaking) home for them. In the last section of Chapter Two, I examine *qiaopi* as a living process in which their author's (such as Zeng's) individual consciousness (rather than a frozen 'collective consciousness') was inscribed within the letters. I argue that the practice of letter-writing creates a space that is neither at home nor away sojourning, but somewhere in-between, a space for a migrant to be at home in the world.

Alongside analysing a moment of reuniting through a family photograph (Grandma Chang), a moment of littering in the courtyard-house by a migrant worker (Yang Cui), and a moment when a migrant worker (Xiao Bin) packs for 'returning' home, **Chapter Three** brings us the key term of 'homeawayness', in the sense that having a rooted home somewhere else, whether concrete or imagined, while having their everyday lives uprooted from that home, the migrant workers possess or are possessed by another sense of being-in-the-world: being *home-away-ness*. I argue that for migrants, the movements between *at-home* and *away-from-home* may be best imagined as neither circular nor linear but instead as an onward spiral. The chapter ends with an exploration of how one makes home through building a life-project along the spiral curve and how one's sense of homeawayness relates to home-making in this spiralling trajectory.

**Chapter Four** includes an analysis of moments of being in the toy factory setting, which reveal tensions between the local factory owner and the migrant workers, between the ideas of work and life. I then discuss how the concept of homeawayness brings us to the very interface of the self and others, and how discrimination and distortion come out of the imagination of others—the imagination that, to some degree, exaggerates the difference, the weaknesses in-between the self and others. During the discussion, I examine the floating mind-set of homeawayness and how one may make home on the move—the essentially dialectic nature of making home away from home, which returns us to the irreducibility of the self and other.

**Chapter Five** examines how migrants live a life and make a (future) home with two kinds of distance, spatial and temporal, and the existential 'struggling'/'strategies' that craft the particular texture of being-in-the-world: homeawayness. I elaborate this with

Yang Cui's moment of being in narrating a dream, struggling to know herself. I then discuss the significance of investigating individual *interiority*, in relation to self-contradiction and homeawayness, self-making and socio-cultural creativity.

The thesis then completes with the **Conclusion and Prospectus**: Keywords for studying home-in-movement. I propose five keywords—homeawayness, moments of being, interiority, cosmopolitan imagination, and walking knowledge—which emerge over the course of the cases study and their analysis throughout the thesis. I argue that these keywords serve for the theoretical and methodological quests in endeavouring to better understand human existential conditions in a world of movement, in particular about migrants' ideas of home and their diverse ways of making home.



# Chapter One The Field

## *The Shape and Being Shaped of Bomaqiao*



*The 'field' in anthropology is becoming a dizzying array of cross-cutting transnational spaces that take place in zones of multiple contestation.*

**-- Paul Stoller (1997: 93)**

The word 'field' in Chinese combines two characters: 田 (*tian*, meaning enclosed farm field) and 野 (*ye*, meaning wild open space). *Tian-ye* (田野) is an oxymoronic term that on the one hand, means a place that is cultivated and enclosed, but on the other, means a space that is wild and open. The oxymoron of the term exists when it is employed in social science, particularly in anthropology, whether with regard to the 'field' as a site, a method or a location (Gupta and Ferguson 1997). Although a 'field' is somehow 'chosen' by a researcher, it is to some degree 'wild' and 'open' in terms of 'unanticipated

discoveries and directions’ (Amit 2000: 17). ‘Where, when, how and whom we encounter can never be subject to our firm control’ (ibid.: 16). In Chapter One, I will illustrate my experience of the ‘field’, which is crafted with my ‘sensual awareness of the smell, tastes, sounds and textures of life among the others’ (Stoller 1997: 23).

Having provided an overview of the Chaoshan region in the Introduction, in this chapter I will zoom-in to the fine texture of the Bomaqiao in which I conducted most of my fourteen-month fieldwork. Similar to many other villages in the Chaoshan region, Bomaqiao has experienced a transformation over the recent decades from being agriculture-dominated to being manufacturing-oriented. I witnessed first-hand what happened to this formerly agricultural area earmarked for urban development, as Bomaqiao is a village near my hometown where I resided until I turned twenty. I lived in Bomaqiao from November 2011 to February 2013 while I carried out my period of intensive participant-observation.

In recent years, the village profile has fundamentally changed: arable areas are not farmed anymore but the land ‘bears’ an industrial park, lots of factories, and new factory-houses. The new factory-houses are multi-functional—as homes for living, as workrooms for assembling manufactured goods, and as warehouses for storing products. Old courtyard-houses are saying good-bye to their owners and starting to meet their new alien residents (migrant workers from other provinces). The old village centre is as obsolete as a dying old man while a new centre is growing up like a teenager.

On the way to understanding what the field site—Bomaqiao—means to me and to the migrants, what it tells me and how it tells me, I approach it by walking in its landscape, listening to its soundscape, tasting from its foodscape, and traversing its timescape. In what follows, I will elaborate why I chose the idea of *scape* to introduce the ‘field’ I experienced, and how I would like to use it.

### **Why *scape*?**

In his work *In Modernity at Large* (1996), Arjun Appadurai uses the suffix *-scape* to compose various dimensions of global cultural flow: ethnoscares, mediascares, ideoscares, financescares, and technoscares, the cross-cultural nature of which gives essence to the way that people, both individuals and the collective, imagine their social

life in the modern world. To some degree, I adopt the suffix *-scape* as Appadurai uses it, as a ‘pathway’ of informing the imagination of social life. However, I would like to closely examine the suffix *-scape* itself in order to give a comprehensive answer to the question, why *scape*?

Let us start from the most familiar *scape*—landscape. Geographer Kenneth Olwig (2005: 20) distinguishes landscape from land by the suffix *-scape*, and he traces the suffix back to its origin. He points out that *-scape* is ‘equivalent to the more common English suffix *-ship*’ and that both generate an abstraction. He argues:

*There might be two friends, comrades or fellows in a room, both concrete beings, but between them they share something abstract and difficult to define, friendship, comradeship or fellowship. (Olwig 2005: 21)*

Olwig then continues:

The suffixes *-scape* and *-ship* stem ultimately from an ancient Germanic root, spelt *shape* in modern English (basically a Germanic language). The power of this sense of shape lies in the dynamic relation between the meaning of shape as, on the one hand, an expression of *-ship* as an underlying nature, state or constitution which manifests itself through an active, creative, shaping process and, on the other, the material form which that process generates—its shape. (ibid.)

From this point of view, with regard to a *scape*, there are at least two aspects to explore: the process of *being scaped* (shaped) and the *scape* (shape) itself. The aspect of how it is *scaped* emphasises the lived experience of being that shapes it, that is to say, *how we shape it* and in turn, *how it shapes us*. Thus, if the shaping process were ignored, a *scape* would be lifeless. In *Being Alive* (2011), Tim Ingold shows us how farmers in medieval times shaped landscape through their embodiment (the term ‘landscape’ has its origins in medieval northern Europe):

Just as cloth is woven from the intertwined threads of warp and weft, so, in medieval times, the land was shaped by the people who, with foot, axe

and plough, and with the assistance of their domestic animals, trod, hacked and scratched their lines into the earth, and thereby created its ever-evolving texture. (Ingold 2011: 126)

In order to explore the shaping process, it is essential to have embodied experience *within the scape*, as the ‘distanced, contemplative and panoramic optic’ (ibid.) *towards it* is by far not enough. This is why anthropologists do fieldwork not just through *observation* but also through *participant observation* in order to know the people. It is through the lived experience that the shaping process expresses the underlying nature, state or constitution of something (Olwig 2005), such as the land, sound, food or time, in this case that of a land-scape, a sound-scape, a food-scape and a time-scape. At the same time, by ‘representing the abstract nature, state or constitution of the land [the sound, the food or the time] in a more concrete objective form one concretises it, and makes it easier to both grasp and facilitate the process by which the land [the sound, the food and the time] is shaped as a social and material phenomenon’ (ibid.: 21).

Like two sides of a coin, the process of *being scaped* and the *scape* itself are entwined with each other. Hence, using the concept of *scape* to introduce the field ensures that, in addition to the usual sketch of the shape of the field included in ethnographies, the researcher will not overlook—and in fact draws attention to—the fact that the field are not given but continually shaped.

In this chapter, I will present the changing landscape, soundscape and foodscape in Bomaqiao under the rural-industrialisation accompanied by the inter-province inward migration. I will also address the timescape that I experienced when I conducted the *qiaopi* archival research in the field. It is these four *scapes*, landscape, soundscape, foodscape, and timescape, that construct my understanding of the ‘field’ that I encountered when I conducted fieldwork in Bomaqiao, both as ‘the ground of the events’ for me to experience, and as ‘an event in itself’ (Berger 1980: 204) for me to explore the migrants’ ideas of home and their acts of home-making away from home. In rendering these four *scapes*, lines and knots emerge, expressing relationships such as those between the present and the past, those between the locals and the migrants, and those between home and non-home space.

## 1. Landscape

### A Walk in Bomaqiao and Walking Knowledge

*Walk around? No! Only ghuasengian<sup>21</sup> walk nowadays!*

-- Chen Ba



Figure 6 - Migrant workers walking on the main road in Bomaqiao (Photograph by the author)

#### My arrival in Bomaqiao

It is the day of my arrival in the field. It is late November, but all the trees are still green and fresh, as I view them from a window on-board the aircraft. Soon after the Boeing-737 lands at Waisha Airport in Shantou city, I take a taxi to Bomaqiao. Sitting inside the taxi, I am getting so excited by whatever whizzes past the car window. Attached to a street lamp is a large billboard on which is printed (only in English) ‘Big Tree Toys—The

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<sup>21</sup> ‘*Ghuasengian*’ is a local insulting term in Chaoshan dialect (Teochew) that refers to migrant workers from other provinces in China. It has been commonly used locally in the Chaoshan region for the last two decades.

Biggest Toy Showroom’; a billboard for a restaurant named ‘*Xin Fayuan Haixiancheng*’ (New Original Seafood City) follows. The taxi then crosses a bridge. All the way from the beginning of the bridge, there are red Chinese knots attached to the street lights, one after another, with the character *fu* (blessing) in the middle of the knots. Immediately after crossing the bridge, a gigantic signboard attracts my attention—‘*Meili xin Chenghai, Zhongguo wanju cheng*’ (Magic New Chenghai, China’s Toy City). For the past ten minutes, thousands of thoughts have been running through my mind. Even with my eyes wide open, I fail to catch most of the scenes that speed past. However, the impression of such a flourishing ‘toy city’ becomes sharply engraved on my mind.

Then, I catch sight of a large building with a slogan emblazoned on it: ‘Continue to emancipate the mind, persist in reform and opening up, establish a civilised and harmonious community’. This suddenly makes me realise that beyond the economic development of a toy industry (my primary impression of the area) is its political ideology—to build a civilised and harmonious community. I do not realise that I have already arrived in Bomaqiao until I glimpse its landmark: the village arch. It is made of stone, and painted and decorated with glazed tiles. It is this landmark that informs me that I have arrived in my field.

After paying the taxi fare, I greet my host landlady Chen Ma<sup>22</sup> and her husband Chen Ba, and have a cup of *gongfu* tea (they are conducting the Chaoshan *gongfu* tea ceremony<sup>23</sup> with a local friend when I arrive). I cannot wait to go out to explore the village. I then attempt to inquire about a route to walk around the village.

‘Walk around? No! Only *ghuasengian* walk nowadays!’ Chen Ba wrinkles up his nose and responds to me negatively.

What? Only *ghuasengian* walk nowadays? Why? And why does he say so, I wonder? How can I become a *ghuasengian* simply by walking around the village? If this is possible, then the implication of the very experience of walking in the village includes both how one *perceives* the world and what he or she *receives* from the world (others’ views towards them). Drawing on the ideas of Tim Ingold and Jo Lee Vergunst (2008: 2)

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<sup>22</sup> I lodged at Chen Ma’s house for the first few weeks after my arrival before I found the courtyard-house where I stayed with a few migrant workers.

<sup>23</sup> The term *gongfu* literally means making effort. The *gongfu* tea ceremony, as a fine way of making tea, is ubiquitous in the everyday life of Chaoshanese.

that ‘not only do we walk because we are social beings, we are also social beings because we walk’, walking in the village would be ‘not just what a body *does* but also what a body *is*’. All of these wonders make me feel more eager to step out into the street in order to figure out the ‘why’ and the ‘how’.

‘What data do you need? I can easily get it for you from the Bomaqiao neighbourhood committees,’ Chen Ba says to me.

‘Oh, thank you! (But...)’ I suddenly feel that it is difficult to continue the ‘but’ (‘but I think I’d better walk around the village first’) because of the gap between Chen Ba’s and my understanding of gathering data. Walking around the village, to me, can be a way of gathering data. However, for Chen Ba, gathering data is more focused on the result—the *data*, and not the process of *gathering*, the experience of walking *per se*.

There follows another moment of silence. I am still looking for a good moment to ask about a village-walking route. The other person who could possibly help me is the tea-maker, Chen Ba’s friend. He continues to make and serve *gongfu* tea, with an affable smile. Although he is quiet all the time, I find support and kindness from his smile. I am expecting him to be understanding, if not of my anthropological research, then at least of my curiosity regarding the village.

Chen Ba’s friend eventually breaks the silence. ‘I think you’d better go to *cang ion dang* (a local word for ‘farmland’) because there are lots of new factories you may not know, and you can go to the *po cuo dao* (a local term for ‘ramshackle old houses’) since most of them are leased to *ghuasengian*.’ New factories on farmland? Old houses lived in by migrant workers? Both seem very interesting to me. More importantly, his suggestion gives me a chance to step out without offending Chen Ba, whose point of view is that only *ghuasengian* walk.

With various ‘why’ and ‘how’ questions in my mind, I take my first step out into the village, not only intending to find my feet in my new surroundings, but also eager to find the answers.

### **A walk in Bomaqiao**

Chen Ba and Chen Ma live in the new residential area in Bomaqiao. The new residential district has been built over the recent decades on land that was previously farmland.

Starting in the 1980s, the local government in Bomaqiao began dividing local farmland into building lots and redistributing them to each agricultural household in the village. Walking in an alleyway in this relatively new residential area, I experience several rises and falls within a distance of just 50 metres. Some of the doorways are about half a metre higher than their neighbours and I wonder to myself why the surface of the alleyway is so hilly.

I then hear the cry of a street vendor selling sugar cane. I walk towards her. Surprisingly, she tries to use Mandarin in her sales pitch to me. However, I respond to her in my fluent Teochew, the local Chaoshan dialect. She admits that she thought I was a migrant worker and I would not understand Chaoshan dialect so she needed to communicate with me in Mandarin, as most Chinese know Mandarin. Usually, Chaoshanese people speak in Chaoshan dialect, which is a member of the Southern Min language family, and is very different from Mandarin. Most of the migrant workers in Chaoshan cannot speak in Chaoshan dialect so migrants communicate with Chaoshanese by using Mandarin, and vice versa. Her attempt to use her poor Mandarin is like a blow to my head, and reminds me of Chen Ba's statement that only migrant workers walk here. I wonder to myself whether this is just because I am walking. She then persuades me to buy a piece of sugar cane. I eat the sugar cane while listening to her complaining about the 'hilly' alleyways.

Standing on top of a 'hill', I see the back of an elderly woman who must be in her seventies, sitting on a stool beside a doorway in the next 'valley'. When I see her from a distance, sitting on a wooden stool and basking in the sunshine, I imagine that she may be knitting or crocheting, or doing nothing but enjoying the sunshine. That is my idea of what an elderly woman in Chaoshan does to pass the time. By the time I reach the 'valley', I see something unexpected. She is not knitting or crocheting but assembling plastic semi-finished toy products. The colourful plastic pieces around the grey-haired old lady cause me to feel a sudden sense of disharmony. I greet her with a smile and then ask her about the rugged ground of the alleyway.

'Our house was built too early.' She glances at her house and continues, 'the foundations for those houses built in recent years were higher and higher.'

'Why?' I ask.



‘To stop the summer flood from coming in every year! Most of the houses with lower foundations have been flooded.’ She continues to complain while becoming more and more emotional. Through the conversation, I learn that the up-and-down alleyway surface is a result of the so-called ‘butterfly effect’: Due to the industrial sewerage and pollutants attached to the ‘invasion’ of manufacturing into Bomaqiao in the recent twenty years, the clean streams running through the village (mainly for irrigating) have disappeared. Almost all of the streams have been blocked by different kinds of pollutants. Therefore, every summer during the rainy season (typhoons and heavy rain are very common in the Chaoshan region), river blockages result in serious flooding in the village. During the flooding season, the Bomaqiao villagers worry about the safety of their own houses. So, when they build their new houses in the new residential area, they tend to raise the foundations of their houses above those of their neighbours.

When pointing out the reason for this up-and-down-ness, the old lady becomes very angry about the pollution from the factories in Bomaqiao. However, what she is assembling is for one of those factories, and so is indirectly contributing to this pollution. Complaining about the pollution from the toy factories in the village while continuing to assemble pieces of toy products for the factories, she expresses herself orally and bodily in such a contradictory way. This shocks me even though I always believe that human beings can be contradictory beings. Despite knowing how toxic it can be to work with plastic toy products, especially during parts of the manufacturing process such as moulding or applying spray-paint, I still decide to do my fieldwork in a toy factory and expose my body to such an environment.

The old lady stands up and tries to pour some plastic pieces out of a big bag. It is my pleasure to give her a hand but I am greeted by an unpleasant smell from the plastic while it is being poured out. Although I want to stay and chat with the elder, the acrid smell becomes too disagreeable, and I find myself with no choice but to leave. As I wave goodbye to her, I continue my walk to the end of the alleyway.

Suddenly an odour of rotting rubbish wafts towards me. It is coming from a pond at the end of the alleyway that is filled with floating trash, which leaves a rancid stench in the air. I try to run away from the unbreathable air, but I find no ‘walk-able’ way for my feet to step forward. There is rubbish scattered everywhere. I hop, by carefully picking

some relatively empty spots to land on. Unfortunately, I still hurt my feet with tiny fragments of glass. In that moment I am able to perceive and understand the old lady's verbal descriptions of 'the polluted streams', 'the river blockages', and 'the serious flooding' both visually and olfactorily.



**Figure 7 - A pond in Bomaqiao (Photograph by the author)**

I escape from the rancid pond and reach an old residential area with courtyard-houses. Since the building of new houses has mushroomed in the new residential areas, the old courtyard-houses have been mostly abandoned; some are let to migrants who work in the nearby factories.

As I walk away from the old residential district, I find myself approaching the factory-field area. Lines of small factories enclose a little square of farmland where I see a poster that informs me that this is a 'farmland protection zone'. Indeed, the piece of land has been preserved for farming but only the land itself, not the polluted water underground and the polluted air above-ground.

I stand by a river next to the 'preserved' farmland, witnessing the fuming black smoke

from the factory and its sewage pouring into it. A breeze drifts across the river, not fresh, in fact unpleasant, and I reflect on everything I have experienced during the walk so far: a village fishpond has become a trash pond; arable land has become factories; and clean streams running through the village have disappeared. The dense sunlight and suffocating polluted air encapsulate my walking body into this changing landscape of rural China, which is under fast industrialisation. Here, as well as the arable land being shaped into factory sites, the wind and the light have also been 'industrialised'. As the original meaning of the Chinese word 'landscape' (*fengjian*) reminds us, wind and light are important mediums. *Fengjing*, meaning landscape or scenery in Chinese, combines *feng* and *jing*, wind and sunlight. I wonder if landscape is, as the Irish poet, John O'Donohue puts it, 'an ancient and silent form of consciousness', for which 'rivers and streams offer voice' (1997: 115-116). If so, then the invasion of industry breaks the 'ancient and silent form of consciousness' of Bomaqiao and blocks the 'voice' offered by the rivers and streams.

Suddenly, a babble of voices diverts my attention away from the landscape. The voices come from a crowd of factory workers leaving work, walking out of a nearby factory. 'Oh, they are all walking!' I eventually witness dozens of people walking! Some of them walk in small groups while chatting; some girls walk arm in arm. At that moment, the increasingly loud put-put of a motorcycle engine breaks through the babble of voices. It is a girl in her twenties, driving from the factory. 'Is she also a migrant worker?' I greet two other female workers from the crowd and they tell me that the girl riding the motorcycle is their secretary, and she is not a migrant but a local. For the second time during the village-walk, Chen Ba's statement (that only migrant workers walk nowadays) hits me.

Several conversations continue, and the two female workers ask me who I am and whether I have come looking for a job in the factory. It turns out that later both of them will become two key informants in my fieldwork, Yang Cui and Xiao Bin. I decide to accompany them, chatting while walking with them all the way to their lunch place—a restaurant run by migrants, along the busy main road of Bomaqiao. There are many restaurants on both sides of the road and I see many migrant workers stepping inside for lunch. I have lunch with Yang Cui and Xiao Bin in a Sichuan eatery, which serves cheap

meals that are too spicy for me. After lunch, we exchange contact information and I go back to Chen Ma's place, the point that I started the walk. The whole walk takes me three hours and ten minutes.

### **Walking knowledge**

If I label myself as 'A' at the starting point of the walk from Chen Ma's place, I came back to her house a slightly different 'me', which I will label as 'A<sub>1</sub>'. In his book *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty (1978) distinguishes between the objective body and the phenomenal body in order to emphasise the role of the body in the human experience. In this case, from A to A<sub>1</sub>, it is not just my objective body—as a physiological entity, which has become three hours and ten minutes older, but also my phenomenal body—my body as I experience it, which has grown. Additionally, what attaches to my growing phenomenal body is my better understanding of Chen Ba's statement that only migrant workers walk. This understanding has grown both through what I have perceived, such as the local secretary who was the only one riding a motorcycle within the off-work crowd, and the busy traffic along the main road with almost the only pedestrians being off-work migrant workers, and how I have been perceived by others as being a migrant worker, both by the local vendor (who thought that I was a migrant worker and so asked me to buy her sugar cane in Mandarin) and by migrant workers themselves (who thought that I was a migrant worker and had gone to the factory in order to find a job there).

So, my continued keen interest in *walking to learn* can be attributed to this village-walk at the beginning of my fieldwork. Keeping Chen Ba's statement in mind, I engaged in the practice of walking in the village almost every day over the course of the fieldwork year—including walking with migrant workers to and from work, to shops or to gamble. I also took several walks following exactly the same route around the village within a day—in the quiet early morning, in the busy daytime, and in the evening—in order to experience and record its different soundscapes.

Walking in Bomaqiao in the early morning, with my walking body I contributed to the morning-exercise landscape and I was regarded as a local person at that moment, since walking was not an early morning practice for migrant workers but for locals in general.

In the daytime, my walking body was usually regarded as a migrant who might walk to work somewhere in a nearby factory. However, walking in the village in the evening could be problematic! I was told by local villagers several times that if I walked along the main road in the evening, I might be regarded as a prostitute who was walking there while showing off my body in order to attract customers, because along the Chengjiang main road is the ‘red light district’. Every evening, when night fell, neon lights from small open rooms shone along the road, and the sex workers’ walking bodies cast their shadows along the road. In sum, in Bomaqiao, walking is bound up with the time of a day, who walks, when, and for what. In this sense, the walking body is temporal. By asking what walking means to people living in a village that is undergoing rapid industrialisation, we find that *when one walks* and *what one walks for* relate to how one is perceived by others, which is embodied in the everyday activity of walking. Walking affected both how people perceived me and how I perceived the world.

In Bomaqiao, walking around in the busy daytime is not regarded as a leisure activity or a fitness exercise as it is for the local villagers in the early morning. Indeed, the traffic in the daytime is too busy for anyone to walk along the roads for relaxation. My feeling of walking along busy roads was like a tiny fish swimming slowly among swiftly moving sharks. To make matters worse, it is not uncommon for road users to violate traffic regulations at any time. The speed of the vehicles caused me to feel as if I could be swallowed up by them at any moment. The feeling drew my attention to the power relationship between the speeding motor vehicles and me as a powerless slow moving human body. Does the power come from the speeding movement? Partially ‘yes’, I may answer. The power comes from the process of energy releasing in the fast movement of an engine.

Let’s return to the statement that ‘only *ghuasengian* walk nowadays’. With more and more traffic, noise, pollution and crowds, to Chen Ba and also to other locals, a walking body shows powerlessness and is ‘out of fashion’. I—being seen as a migrant worker walking around—became someone who is ‘too slow’, someone who resides at the margins of the local (and maybe also global) order of speed. But it did not bother me to be out of fashion. To me, the ability to slow down is to ‘free’ oneself from the rush, and to be able to do other than what one actually does. And, in fact, it was my embodied

experience of walking that enabled me to have a better understanding of Chen Ba's statement, which differed from what I could learn from using any kind of vehicle.

During the year, I also sensed the village by bike, motorcycle, and car, to experience different interactions with the village—seventeen minutes cycling, five minutes motorcycling, and seven minutes driving. What I learned about the village from my driving experience is that it is part of a flourishing 'toy city'. Sitting in the car with nice classical music and the car's fragrance, I could not sense the noisy traffic and factories, the smelly pond and the polluted air. And of course I would have missed chances to get to know the 'walking migrants' if I had driven instead of walking every day during my fieldwork. So, being fully exposed to the world, what the walking body perceives and receives is thicker in different ways and more detailed than when using vehicles.

From this point of view, walking is a way of getting to know detail through an embodied experience *within* and *across* space and time. I call this kind of knowledge, 'walking knowledge'.

Walking knowledge is the knowledge that first comes from what Kent C. Bloomer and Charles W. Moore call 'haptic experience'—'by climbing a mountain rather than staring at it' (1977: 34). Drawing on the work of Gibson (1966), Bloomer and Charles (1977) discuss the haptic experience of moving through a house and argue that walking is a haptic experience and that it is never more obvious than when you are in a house. It is a haptic way of sensing space and knowing the surrounding world. Yet, they state that the haptic experience is not just involved with instruments of touch, such as the hands, but it also includes the entire body. Here the word 'haptics' is understood more broadly; 'treated as a perceptual system[,] the haptic incorporates all those sensations (pressure, warmth, cold, pain, and kinesthetics), which were previously divided up into the sense of touch, and thus it includes all those aspects of sensual detection which involve physical contact both inside and outside the body' (ibid.: 34). Walking is a kind of haptic experience of an environment and one's haptics are a perception of being-in-the-world that is gained by movement, touch and other sensibilities. The haptic walking experience includes not only one's perception of the world but also the perception of existing in the world. In other words, walking knowledge includes both *perceiving the world* and *being aware of being perceived* (Gibson 1966; Merleau-Ponty 1978) through the haptic

experience of walking.

In order to specify what I mean by walking knowledge, here I would like to list some examples of what is not walking knowledge. For instance, instead of walking in Bomaqiao's landscape, I might have just stood still in front of a huge photocopy of its landscape and looked at it, so it only involved my visual sense of the landscape without any kind of physical movement and without any embodied interaction with the village; or instead of walking from place A to place B in Bomaqiao, I might have just stayed at place A and imagined walking to B, so that only involved my thoughts. The knowledge I gained either from the pure experience of *eye walking* (viewing the landscape photo) or from the pure experience of *mind walking* (imagining the walk) is another kind of knowledge. If I had just started at place B and remembered place A, this would have been a fourth kind of knowledge. Knowledge from viewing a walk but not actually doing the walk, imagining a walk, or remembering a walk are all different to walking knowledge.

However, walking knowledge is not a specific set of knowledge. For example, within the same route, walking knowledge that comes from walking alone is different from walking with two migrant workers; and walking with a bad foot (because the first time I went for a walk a piece of glass hurt the sole of my foot so I was very conscious of every step I took) is different from walking after hearing good news (for example, when I had the opportunity of an job interview in a factory). Among these different kinds of walking knowledge, there may be no one essential thesis, idea or quality that they all share. Rather, they concern a 'polythetic category' (Needham 1975, cited in Rapport and Overling 2000: 173) of knowledge, which allows us to be subtle enough to distinguish walking knowledge from each embodied experience, similar to philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein's (1978) idea of 'family resemblance'.

Drawing on the idea of 'family resemblances', different types of walking knowledge may have overlapping commonalities with the experience of walking *per se* but they do not necessarily share a common theme or idea. What makes walking knowledge different from the idea of 'family resemblances' is as follows: among things that do not necessarily share one common theme, the approach of 'family resemblances' is to look over a range to find certain features that link them all; while the approach of walking knowledge does not come from *seeing over a range* but from *seeing along the process*, which is similar to

Tim Ingold's (2007b) idea of wayfarers' way of knowing. Wayfarers move through the world while their knowledge grows along the paths they take. *Ontogenetically, the knowing body is being continually constituted and is always just a temporal product.*

Take my own growing understanding of the statement 'only *ghuasengian* walk nowadays' as an example. In what follows I offer a simplified version (I will elaborate in the other chapters) that shows my continually changing walking knowledge, which grew with my steps walking in the village throughout the year of my fieldwork.

With Chen Ba's statement in mind, for the first several walks that I took in the village, I walked to get to know the relation between walking and identity in the village, which then triggered my interest in walking in the village. More walks followed, which directed me to the exploration of *mianzi* (social face), and how a person can 'gain face' or 'lose face' through walking in the village (see Chapter One, Foodscape). This then guided me to the understanding of how social face plays an important or unimportant role in walking among the locals and the migrants, as some of my informants cared a great deal about having face while others said that they did not need face in Bomaqiao. The different concerns about social face among the locals who were at home and the migrants who were away-from-home inspired me to take some more walks to explore their ideas of home. And I found that having a rooted home somewhere else, whether concrete or imagined, while having their everyday lives uprooted from that home, the migrant workers possessed or were possessed by another sense of being-in-the-world, which I call 'homeawayness' (see Chapter Three). Besides walking with the migrants, I also worked in a factory with them. We ate, shopped, gambled, and farmed together. I was rejected 18 times by factor owners, disregarded by the locals, and robbed by migrants. All of these embodied experiences led me to seek universal patterns beyond home and homeawayness, in the sense that one can be at home or home-away at any time and anywhere in certain social relations between one's self and one's social obligation. Like the two sides of a coin, home combines both the expression of one's self and one's social obligation (see Chapter Two and Chapter Five). The idea of homeawayness led me to consider the very interface of the self and the others, and how discrimination and distortion come out of an imagination of the others (see Chapter Four). Eventually, the way in which an individual imagines the self and the others, with internal conflict or tension in some way, led me to



explore *oxymoronic being* as a possible universal human existential condition (see Conclusion).

Is it really true that ‘only *ghuasengian* walk’ nowadays? By saying that, Chen Ba points out phenomena of the local world: accompanied by the light industries in the local world, more and more busy traffic on the roads has been making the whole environment less and less walking-friendly; in the past, people in Bomaqiao mainly walked; nowadays more and more local people have cars, motorcycles or bikes, which enable them to move ‘faster’ and ‘nicer’ than walking; this is compared to the factory migrant workers who still mainly walk to work in Bomaqiao, exposing themselves in the polluted environment. More importantly, the statement is his ironic expression in order to be emphatic and understand that there is a difference between the local people and migrant workers. Here, using the act of walking is just one example for Chen Ba to draw a line between the locals and migrants. He might also say ‘only *ghuasengian* dress as gaudily as this’ (which happened later in the year), to take another example.

Here, ‘*ghuasengian*’ as a local insulting term, tells us that migrant workers are not appreciated in general in the local world: they are either denigrated as trouble-makers or they are pitied as victims. They are people but the locals turn them into *ghuasengian*. At the moment that Chen Ba makes the judgement that ‘only *ghuasengian* walk’, in his mind, he is drawing a line to separate the locals and migrants in term of walking. He simply reduces the world of a group of people to a statement—‘only *ghuasengian* walk’. The fact is, I also walk, the locals also walk, and so does Chen Ba. Although less and less local people walk to work, it is still not true that only *ghuasengian* walk nowadays. To draw the line, Chen Ba exaggerated the fact by means of his imagination. His discrimination against migrants may come from this very moment of drawing such a clear line to polarise ‘us’ and ‘them’. By using the example of walking, Chen Ba fills the empty space in his knowledge of *ghuasengian* with the noise of his imaginings. His imagination and exaggeration of the dissimilarity—‘only *ghuasengian* walk’—thus serve as the interface of his making sense of the locals and the migrants, or the self and the others. Between what Chen Ba said and what he did are apparently contradictory. But it is still a personal truth to him. Through the oxymoronic expression, he makes sense of the self through the others, and the others through the self.

In short, it was all of the continually growing walking knowledge that led me to move on in my fieldwork and find my path on the way to exploring further human knowledge. Now, if I put the category of walking knowledge into its wider sense—knowledge that does not just come from walking specifically, but from the embodied experience in general of doing ethnographic fieldwork—then this whole thesis can be seen as a kind of polythetic walking knowledge in terms of knowing through my ethnographic embodied experience. It can be presented as moment of being, such as moments of listening to Bomaqiao's soundscape, tasting from its foodscape, and traversing its timescape, as will be discussed in the following sections of this chapter.

## 2. Soundscape

### A Moment of Hearing and Street Cries in Bomaqiao

*Hearing is a way of touching at a distance.*

-- Murray Schafer (1977: 11)

#### *A Song of a Street Cry*

*I will close my eyes, do nothing but listen.*

*The window I lean on is rattling, mixing with the blowing wind.*

*I am told that the typhoon Qide is saying 'good-bye' to us.*

*Following the sound-track of pigeons wheeling in the air*

*I raise and swivel my head slightly.*

*A panting engine is approaching,  
so that I 'see' a motorcycle, idling,  
while distant cars passing continuously  
with brief honks further away.*

*Emerging is a rhythmic street cry,  
describing a long curve in the sky:*

‘旧铜老铁来卖，塑胶鞋银叠灰来卖，啤酒罇啤酒罐来卖’<sup>24</sup>

‘旧铜老铁 ... 塑胶鞋银叠灰 ... 啤酒罇啤酒罐...’

‘旧铜 ... 塑胶鞋 ... 啤酒罇 ... ...’

‘旧铜 ... 塑 ... 啤 ...’

‘旧 ... 塑 ...’

‘旧 ...’

‘ ... ’

*The song goes a long way gradually, reaching its acoustic horizon.*

*To frame the soundscape within a border of time,*

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<sup>24</sup> Translation into English of this street cry: ‘buying scrap copper and scrap iron, buying plastic shoes and ash of joss paper, buying beer bottles and beer tins’.

*I open my eyes  
switching the soundscape into a landscape  
-- A narrow alleyway in Bomaqiao village.*

*August 18<sup>th</sup> 2012 [July 2<sup>nd</sup> 2012 of the lunar calendar], Tongjia Alley*

[These lines are from my field notes]

### **A moment of hearing**

It is a day like any other day in the alleyways in Bomaqiao, filled with the sounds of wind, pigeons wheeling, engines coming and going, random car honks further on the main road and expected and unexpected street cries. I have just escaped from the toy factory [in which I have worked with migrant workers] where I was embraced by the hum of machines. Passing by factories and then some old houses, I turn a corner into a relatively new residential area<sup>25</sup>, which is imbued with a much stronger presence of everyday life. Walking along an alleyway in this area, I feel that I am missing something with my eyes open. To reduce the visual distraction, I close my eyes in order to listen to the sounds surrounding me for a moment. I find a step in Tongjia Alley to sit down on, next to a window.

Switching off the light of sight, the first thing I hear is the sound of the rattling window that I am leaning on; it is within touching distance. The wind blows to the southwest. I have learned from the local people that usually the southwest movement of the wind in summer time is the sign of a departing typhoon. So I know that typhoon *Qide* is finally leaving after several days hovering around the coastal areas in South China. Air flows bring sounds that are further way than my touching distance. I raise my head and twist round slightly in order to follow the soundtrack of a flock of pigeons, flying in the air. Right at that moment, the ‘put-put’ sound of a motorcycle engine suddenly breaks the circle soundtrack. The panting engine also cuts off my ability to hear the distant traffic noise that I am too familiar with to listen to consciously. A melodic song then covers the gloomy traffic noise. It is the song of a street crier calling to collect scrap copper, scrap

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<sup>25</sup> From the 1980s, the Bomaqiao local government started to distribute arable land to each agricultural household in the village to build new homes and factories.

iron, plastic shoes, ash from joss paper (spirit money)<sup>26</sup> and empty beer bottles and tins.

The song is split up into three phrases. Each phrase begins with a sharp emphasis on the first word: ‘旧’ (# gu<sup>7</sup>), ‘塑’ (# suag<sup>4</sup>), ‘啤’ (# bi<sup>5</sup>), and ends with the same words ‘来卖’ (b lai<sup>5</sup> bhoiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiii<sup>7</sup>) with a long voice, which means ‘bring (them) to sell (to me)’. The street vendor continues to cry the three phrases over and over, singing in tune. I feel myself in a ‘moment of being’; also like an audience at a live concert in an alleyway in the sense in which John Cage defines music as ‘sounds around us whether we’re in or out of concert halls’ (Cage, cited in Schafer 1986: 96). The song becomes so much a part of the atmosphere and the vivid life of the alleyway that without it the tenor of village living would be incomplete.

From the rotund tones and the deep, masculine voice, I know that the cry is from an older man. He sings so placidly that I feel that the melody becomes part of him, that the song embodies his story of a life of street crying. While enjoying ‘the live concert’, I am also a young listener listening to a meaningful story from an elder. It is a story about an old man collecting scraps for recycling by crying from one lane to another, probably day after day and year after year. Moreover, the inflection of the voice conveys my ‘hearing range’ from the present to the past, and several songs from street criers emerge from my memories of Chinese streets:

‘补铜锅三离锅, 补面盆白铁桶; 补铜锅三离锅, 补面盆白铁桶...’ [Tracks One]

- ‘Copper pan aluminium pot repairs, washbowl and galvanised iron bucket repairs; copper pan aluminium pot repairs, washbowl and galvanised iron bucket repairs...’

‘补塑胶鞋树泥鞋; 补塑胶鞋树泥鞋...’ [Tracks Two]

- ‘Plastic shoes rubber shoes repairs; Plastic shoes rubber shoes repairs...’

‘旧铜老铁来卖, 塑胶鞋银叠灰来卖, 啤酒罇啤酒罐来卖...’ [Tracks Three]

- ‘[Any] scrap copper and scrap iron to sell, [any] plastic shoes and ash of joss paper to sell, [any] beer bottles and beer tins to sell...’

[In the CD attached in the thesis, Tracks One to Three are demonstration recordings of the street criers (above) now almost disappeared, which I made when I interviewed Lao

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<sup>26</sup> Most kinds of joss paper are made of paper with metal foil so the ash contains valuable foil that can be reused.

Tong, a ‘retired’ street crier. He talked to me with great passion and gave demonstrations of several street cries formerly used in the region.]

It is the rich and melodious voice that triggers my memory of these beautiful street cry songs that I heard when I was young in the Chaoshan region. Those street criers provided services, namely repairing broken metal pans or plastic shoes. In a time of scarcity, the business of repairing broken commodities was ubiquitous. People repaired broken commodities before throwing them away or selling them at cheap prices. However, this business is fast disappearing as the idea of repairing anything is disappearing, now that there is mass production by machines.

During this moment, the street cry brings me from the imagination of alleyway life to the everyday life of renewing or repairing broken commodities. I hear the changing ideas from repairing to renewing things. I hear the disappearing sound and the disappearing idea of repairing. For me, it is a moment of hearing a change, the sound of a changing attitude towards consumption. While I appreciate the music in the alleyway, the story of an aged street crier’s life, I also hear an echo of a time of scarcity.

The sound gradually fades, but the melody still lingers in my ears. Sinking into thinking about the disappearing idea of repairing and the accompanying dying out of street cries, the song of the street cry also brings me a moment of being-as-an-anthropologist who wants to freeze this beautiful moment before it melts forever, either by recording it or writing it down. Moreover, my sense of all of the sounds (of the typhoon, the pigeons, the motorcycle, the traffic, and the street cry) surrounding me for this short period is so rich that I would like to frame this ‘picturesque’ auditory landscape, this ‘soundscape’.

### **Being in a soundscape**

Now, here we meet the term ‘soundscape’. What is a soundscape? What are scholars talking about when they talk about a soundscape? Canadian composer and theorist Murray Schafer (1977) offers a broad definition<sup>27</sup> of a soundscape in *The Tuning of the*

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<sup>27</sup> Murray Schafer offered the first definition of ‘soundscape’ in *The New Soundscape: A Handbook for the Modern Music Teacher* in 1969. In the following years, Schafer engaged his colleagues at Simon Fraser

*World*, as ‘the sonic environment’, with an emphasis placed on the way that it is perceived and understood by the individual or society. It may refer to actual environments or abstract constructions like musical compositions. From there, the term ‘soundscape’ has become increasingly used in ethno-musical and anthropological studies, such as Steve Feld’s (1990, 1991a, 1991b) pioneering study of the soundscape in rainforest societies and Tom Rice’s (2003) research on patients’ experiences of hospital soundscapes. However, scholars like Tim Ingold (2007a) have criticised the term in recent years as having outlived its usefulness or as being misapplied, in terms of talking too much about the ‘*scape*’ (shape) instead of the process of ‘being *scaped*’ (being shaped).

Here, I firstly use the term as an approach to frame the short period of the sonic environment in the alleyway in the village. Then, I use it as a resource for further analysis, both of its ‘*scape*’ and the process of ‘being *scaped*’. Similar to the term ‘landscape’, ‘soundscape’ provides a way of describing the relationship between sound and place. I define a soundscape in its narrow sense as the sonic environment in a particular physical and social context that one perceives within a specific time and space—the period of time during which one experiences sounds within one’s hearing range. I place an emphasis on the individual perception of the sonic environment when I employ the term. As Ingold (2000) points out, the multi-sensory nature of the perceptual experience requires the multi-sensory conceptualisation of place. To Ingold (2007: 11), sound is ‘a phenomenon of experience—that is, of our immersion in, and commingling with, the world in which we find ourselves.’ Similarly, Feld (1996) claims that the exploration of sonic sensibilities brings him to understand the significance of sound to experiential truth, while Rice (2003: 4) argues that ‘sounds, combined with an awareness of sonic presence, is posited as a powerful force in shaping how people interpret experience.’ From this point of view, experiencing a soundscape in a place contributes to one’s understanding of the place and the people in it. Also, I define a soundscape as being within a certain time and space. In the Tongjia alleyway, the soundscape I experienced reached its border as far as my hearing went—the end of the alleyway where it joins a main road with busy

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University in his work, organised the World Soundscape Project (WSP) and conducted fieldwork in Canada and Europe about noise pollution in the acoustic environment.

traffic noise, and between when I closed my eyes and when I opened them, which lasted for about two minutes. I argue that as with the social context, the time and space of a soundscape are important for soundscape analysis.

Now more questions arise: What is soundscape analysis? How can we analyse a soundscape? Murray Schafer (1994) points to three elements, which are key in a soundscape analysis: keynote sounds, signals, and soundmarks. In a soundscape, according to Schafer, *keynotes* are sounds that ‘are heard by a particular society continuously or frequently enough to form a background against which other sounds are perceived’ (ibid.: 272). *Signals* refer to the sounds ‘to which the attention is particularly directed’ (ibid.: 275), and a *soundmark* is ‘a community sound which is unique or processes qualities which make it specially regarded or noticed by the people in that community’ (ibid.: 10). Borrowing these three key terms from Schafer, I will elaborate these three features in the soundscape of the alleyway in Bomaqiao that I have just recorded.

The *keynote* sounds in this soundscape were the sounds of the leaving typhoon, the pigeons wheeling in the air above, and the far off noise of the traffic from the main road. Created by the geography and climate of the east coast of South China, the sound of a typhoon is too familiar for the villagers to listen to consciously, especially during summer. Pigeons’ wheeling is also a familiar sound for the people living around here. In the alleyway neighbourhood, there are several households which raise pigeons on the roof of their houses. Flocks of pigeons take off from their lofts, and circle again and again in the sky during the daytime. Therefore, the sound of pigeons wheeling in the air is very common to the villagers living in this residential area. The continuing traffic noise from the main road was another keynote sound in this soundscape, one which is ubiquitous in this fast-industrialising village.

As with any village in South China, instead of being filled with wind over the paddy field, traffic noise now plays an important part as a background keynote sound in Bomaqiao. The world is changing and so is its soundscape. In this specific soundscape, the traffic noise as a keynote sound of Bomaqiao is relatively new. In the last ten years, the main roads in Bomaqiao have been widened in order to cater for more and more traffic, which has mainly been generated by industrial transport. Vans, delivery trucks,



and pickup trucks come and go. The ubiquitous traffic noises from diverse internal combustion engines have become the new keynotes of this fast-industrialising village.

The engine-pant of the motorcycle and the street cry were obviously signals of the soundscape. Normally, a motorcycle engine sound belongs to the traffic noise contributing the keynotes. However, in this specific soundscape, the emerging engine pant differed from the messy traffic noise because it brought unique information. Motorcycles are so common in Bomaqiao that almost every household has one or more nowadays. The alleyways in Bomaqiao are too narrow to give access to cars<sup>28</sup>. For people who live in the alleyway area, the engine sounds from motorcycles are recognisable; they signal that someone is back home or going out. Below is a mundane conversation I had with Chen Ma, who lives in Tongjia alleyway:

‘Hi, Chen Ma, I am going to visit Lao Li next door,’ I said.

‘She is away now!’ Chen Ma told me.

‘Really? How can you know she is not home?’ I was surprised.

‘From the sound of her leaving motorcycle,’ Chen Ma said.

‘Oh, I see.’ I understood suddenly.

The other signal in this soundscape was the street cry, which my attention was particularly directed to after the signal of the panting engine. It was firstly the musical motif that attracted my attention. Then the words—crying to buy scrap copper, iron, broken plastic shoes, and ash from joss paper, beer bottles and beer tins—held my interest. Besides the attractive idea of renewing or repairing commodities that the street cry intimated, the buying of joss paper ash also aroused my interest.

A street crier informed me that not every day was a good day for collecting ash from joss paper in Bomaqiao but July 2<sup>nd</sup> in the lunar calendar is one of the good days. Firstly, the villagers worship the local gods on the first and fifteenth days of the lunar calendar of each month all year, and they worship the God of Land<sup>29</sup> on every second and sixteenth day. People offer fruit, sweets, rice, and dishes to local gods, and burn joss paper. So, one

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<sup>28</sup> In the new residential area in Bomaqiao, the alleyways were designed to be accessed by bicycles and motorcycles, not cars. This is because they were designed in the 1980s, when the bicycle was the main vehicle and the motorcycle had become more and more popular, while almost none of the villagers had a car. However, not all of the alleyways nowadays are motorcycle-accessible because some are too hilly.

<sup>29</sup> The God of Land is one of the most-widely worshipped gods among the Chinese people. In Chaoshan, clay is canned and respected as a god in a shrine on the floor in almost every household, factory and office.

may collect more ash from joss paper on the second day or the sixteenth day of each month. More importantly, July 1<sup>st</sup> is the first day of the ‘Hungry Ghosts Festival’ in Bomaqiao (and in most places in the Chaoshan region). The villagers believe that July 1<sup>st</sup> is the day when Yama opens the gate of hell to liberate solitary ghosts (who have no family to worship them) for a month. During this month, the villagers will make offerings to the ghosts three times: on the first day, the fifteenth day, and the last day of the month. As with most of the worship activities in Chaoshan, people not only offer food but also burn joss paper. To some degree, as a signal of the soundscape, the street cry not only ‘signals’ its rhythmic melody but also has a rich social implication and cultural context.

The street cry also played the role of a soundmark in the soundscape because of the unique local dialect in which it was cried—Teochew. Other street cries in Chaoshan dialect in Bomaqiao include cries from those selling fresh fish, seasonal fruits and vegetables, cooking spices (e.g. soy sauce and fish sauce), herbal medicine and the like. All of these Teochew street cries are soundmarks of any soundscape in the Chaoshan region because of their unique usage of the local dialect. In other words, they make the soundscape noticeable to the Chaoshan people. To call attention to their wares or services, each hawker has his or her distinctive cry in Teochew: a rhythmic song or just a word or two with special tones.

A street vendor’s signature sound represents a distinctive aural appeal to residents seeking a particular ware or service. Some vendors also use bells, horns or gongs. For example, there were two street vendors selling herbal medicine powder in Bomaqiao. One used two short words ‘药散’ (ioh<sup>8</sup> suan<sup>3</sup>) while ringing a bell, while the other one mimicked him by also crying ‘药散’ (ioh<sup>8</sup> suan<sup>3</sup>) without ringing a bell. The two different vendors were both selling medicinal herbs. But, Chen Ma told me that she always chooses the one who cries with a ringing bell because she knows that the quality of herbs is better than the other one. This suggests that the unique cry identifies the individual vendor as much as the commodity being sold.

Although some of the street sellers adapt their cries and their wares as they have for centuries, many others have quit. Street cries of knife-sharpeners, scissors grinders, pot menders, and shoe menders have faded away. I was able to record one that may disappear soon: the street cry for bamboo mat repairs. In an interview with the aged mat mender, he

told me that sometimes there was almost no business for about a week. But he had just got so used to this life-long career that he could not stop doing it:

‘I am old now. I will keep doing it till I am too old to ride my bike and carry this tool box!’ He lifted his kit to show to me. ‘But cycling is good for my health, and if I am lucky for some days, I may earn a little pocket money.’ He talked to me with a kind smile. ‘Now people are rich. They can buy a new mat for a cheap price. I am old-style and have become useless...’ he continued.

Like the mat repairer, some other street criers providing repair services have been forced to stop due to less and less market demand. However, even with the market demand, some street criers are forced to stop, as not all of the street criers are welcome by the villagers. Chen Ma told me that in Bomaqiao there was a street vendor crying out for his homemade brined-vegetables/seashells for breakfast at the crack of dawn.

The cry was:

‘杂咸<sup>30</sup> (zab<sup>8</sup> giam<sup>5</sup>), 杂咸(zab<sup>8</sup> giam<sup>5</sup>)...’

The street crier had been doing business for years in Bomaqiao. In the past when Bomaqiao was a rural village, it was not a problem to start his street cry at dawn because most of the villagers also started their farm work in the early morning. However, the life of the villagers has changed with the urbanisation of the village. Now, most of the villagers are not farmers but either workers or businessmen. Hence, they do not get up as early as in the past, especially the younger generation. So, in the early morning this street melody has become ‘noise’, particularly to the new generation. While the older generation has grown accustomed to the sounds and has learned to take them for granted, for the younger generation, the early morning yelling is very annoying. It is so loud that more and more young villagers consider it a public nuisance. Eventually, the aged vendor got an ‘official ban’ from the villagers and had to stop doing his business.

And yet, the urbanisation has also brought new sounds of street crying to Bomaqiao. With more and more migrant workers in Bomaqiao, street cries in Mandarin can be heard from migrants who have come from other provinces in China. I once bumped into a peddler selling razor blades, pocketknives and different kinds of batteries. He had

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<sup>30</sup> ‘杂’ means mixing, and ‘咸’ means salty. In Teochew, ‘咸’ refers to any dish that is served with rice for a meal. ‘杂咸’ refers to any kinds of brined vegetable or seashell that is usually served with rice porridge for breakfast.

migrated with his daughter who worked in a spray-paint factory in Bomaqiao... (My mind is continuing to sink into my memory about the migrant peddler, his daughter, and their stories.)

### **Back to the factory**

Suddenly, a fighter plane winged through the sky, passing overhead into the distance. The air crackle woke up all of the silent motorcycle security alarms around the Tongjia Alley:

‘Beep– beep– beep– beep...’

‘– Beep– beep– beep– beep...’

‘Beep– beep– beep– beep...’

‘– Beep– beep– beep– beep...’

This series of rapid and loud closed-loop beeps woke me up from my meditation on the alleyway soundscape. I stood up, and headed back to the factory. Stepping into the workshop, the familiar sound of a busy factory setting welcomed me. The noise of a crowd chatting mixed with the gathered noise of assembling plastic toys, all drowned out by the noise of the machinery:

‘When I was young, I’d listen to the radio, waiting for my favourite songs...’. It is a ring from someone’s mobile phone.

‘I like the ring! Where did you get it?’ Xiao Bin asks.

‘From a roadside stand in the market and to download one song, just two yuan!’ Xiao Zhao answers.

‘Show me the stand tomorrow...’ Xiao Bin continues.

‘... ...’

‘... ...’

The next day, I follow Xiao Zhao and Xiao Bin to the stand in the market place in Bomaqiao.

The market place is composed of an indoor market and two nearby parallel streets that are next to each other. All of the stalls in the indoor market are fully occupied by locals. The first street next to the indoor market holds a mixture of local stalls and migrants’ stalls, and a further second street is all about migrants’ favourite food. Each time I walk

through from the indoor market to the main market street, and then continue to the migrants' market street, I experience the changing soundscape from the buzz of voices all in local Chaoshan dialect (Teochew), to a mixture of local dialects with many other dialects from migrants, and eventually I am surrounded by voices without any local dialects. Together with the different soundscapes shaped by the different languages, smells of food and the different ways in which sellers present them fashion the different rhythms and choreographies of the indoor market and the two market-streets, presenting us with two very distinct foodscapes—the locals' and the migrants'. In the next section, I will explore the two foodscapes in the market place and how they have been shaped by the migrant factory workers from other provinces, and the negotiations behind their economic, social, and cultural co-existence.

### 3. Foodscape

#### The Market Place in Bomaqiao and the Taste of Home

*Tell me what you eat: I will tell you what you are.*

-- Anthelme Brillat-Savarin (2002: 3)



Figure 8 - A migrant is drying bamboo shoots brought from home (Photograph by the author)

#### Food, migration, and home

We may sense home by sounds, smells, touches, sights or tastes. In this sense, home is a multi-sensorial phenomenon, being experienced through the body. If home is considered ‘the sensory world of everyday experience’ (Ahmed 1999: 341), then migration may involve ruptures in the continuity of the sensory world, since migrants may be a long way away from those sounds, smells, touches, sights or tastes. Can food smooth the ruptures and ease the sense of fragmentation or discontinuity? This section addresses the question of how migrants try to ‘be at home’ when they are away from home, in the context of food, ranging from buying to cooking, from consuming to socialising.

‘I will show you next time when we buy food in the market.’ I said this to my informants (migrant workers) many times during my fieldwork when I found it difficult to put tastes into words or to convey to them a specific flavour of the Chaoshan local food, which was completely new to them. In this section, I will use a photographic narrative in an attempt to engage my readers’ other senses, in a similar way to how I incorporated sight through bringing my informants to the local markets. The photographic narrative focuses on the foodscapes in the Bomaqiao market place, a place to ‘taste’ ethnic mixing and different foodways. Most of the photographs below are from a shopping journey to the market place that I made with my informant Yang Cui. During the journey, Yang Cui and I took photos moment by moment of things that caught our eyes and minds. Each of the photos below represents a momentary experience. Throughout the photographic narrative, I will insert analyses to reveal the cognitive processes behind those moments, with further discussion about the relationships between the cognitive processes and how food in Bomaqiao is priced, shopped for, identified and experienced among the locals, migrants and me (as a research student studying abroad and doing ‘anthropology at home’). As the photographic narrative progresses, it will engage in a comparison of the local market and the migrants’ market, the politics of food consumption, the different experiences of ‘being at home’ in the market place—both mine and Yang Cui’s—and our different ‘tastes’ of home.

### **Experiencing foodscapes in Bomaqiao**

It is about 6:30am. Yang Cui and I are walking towards the market place in Bomaqiao. Yang Cui prefers to do her daily food shopping in the early morning before the morning shift in the factory starts at 7:30am. We are walking towards the main street of the market place, which lies in between the local indoor market (on the left) and the migrants’ outdoor market-street (on the right).

**Shuhua:** You always buy vegetables here?

**Yang Cui:** Yes, here vegetables are much cheaper! But not today... And here we can get real chilli.

We are chatting while passing several vegetables stalls run by migrants on the main street. We then reach the junction of the locals’ indoor market and the migrants’ market-

street. We walk arm-in-arm, turning from the main street into the local market.



**Figure 9 - The migrants' market in Bomaqiao (Photograph by the author)**



**Figure 10 - A vegetable stand in the migrants' market (Photograph by the author)**





Figure 11 - The busy local indoor market in Bomaqiao (Photograph by the author)

### **Social Face (*Mianzi*)— ‘But not today...’**

‘Yes, here vegetables are much cheaper than there! But not today...’ Yang Cui said. What Yang Cui meant by ‘here’ is the stalls run by migrants, rather than locals. Yang Cui usually bought food from the migrant stallholders, since in general they charge lower prices for their food than the locals. Then, why did she say, ‘but not today’?

The ‘but’ comes from the concern about price and social face (*mianzi*). *Mianzi* literally means ‘face’ in Chinese. Face, as the first interactive layer of the body, is physical as well as social. The word ‘*mianzi*’ is usually used because of its social aspect—the face that can be gained, saved, enhanced, lost, or damaged through social interactions. The market place is where food and capital are exchanged. It also serves as a place of people’s everyday social interactions as they meet here for their everyday shopping (some of them do shopping twice or even three times a day). Choosing to purchase food in the market place (not in the supermarket) in Bomaqiao is not only a rational economic action but also involves great consideration of *mianzi*. It is different from the practice of shopping for food in supermarkets, which is a choice mainly about the balance between

one's food preference and the price.

With regard to food shopping practice in the market place, *mianzi* mainly works in this way: shopping in the market place is tightly connected with family profile, social status, and ethnic identity, which may result in *you-mianzi* (having face) or *mei-mianzi* (having no face). *Mianzi* can be obtained through the way in which people perform a certain 'social code' that is publicly recognized by other villagers. In practice, a villager may feel *you-mianzi* (having face) when he (or she) buys expensive food from local stalls. By contrast, when a Chaoshan local person buys food from a migrant's stall, if he (or she) bumps into villagers he (or she) knows, he (or she) may feel that he (or she) has no face. This feeling comes from the pressure or power of gossip among the villagers regarding the fact that shopping from migrants' stalls (which have food at cheaper prices) could be a sign that he (she) cannot afford the 'better' (in the sense of more expensive) local food. Thus, gossip around the village about his (or her) family economic situation may start from the act of buying food from a migrant's stall. This would lead to one's feeling of *mei-mianzi* (having no face) among the villagers. Hence, in the market place, food is not only a commodity but also a public signifier of one's ethnic identity and social status.

It is about this concern that Yang Cui says 'but not today'. As far as I know Yang Cui, especially her understanding of how social face plays an important role in Chaoshan people's (the local) everyday lives, when she said 'but not today' she was concerned about my social face, since at that moment, to Yang Cui, I was a Chaoshan person, a local. The subtext is clear: 'I know that you local people care about your *mianzi* a lot'. This was something she said to me frequently. After staying in the same courtyard-house and working at the same factory for months, several times Yang Cui expressed concerned about my *mianzi* when making her decisions. As a migrant worker, Yang Cui believed that she did not know any local sellers, so there was no 'face' in between. In her everyday shopping by herself, she could buy food from whichever stalls she wanted, mainly food stalls run by migrants. However, on this occasion, she was doing shopping with me (a local), so she did not want me to be *mei-mianzi* (having no face) due to buying cheaper food from the migrants' food stalls, though I did not really care about the problem of *mianzi*.

In the market place, Yang Cui attempted to save my *mianzi*, while on other occasions

she would expect something as ‘render’ or ‘reward’, since *mianzi* could be a means of manipulating and obtaining potential resources. To Yang Cui, I was multiple as well as temporal. When I was shopping with her in the market place, in her view, I was a Chaoshan local with a different identity from her as a migrant from another province. When I sat next to her, assembling toy products with her in the factory, to her I was a worker, sharing the same identity as her. When she made a phone call home and asked me to talk to her daughter, at those moments, to Yang Cui I was a well-educated overseas student who could be a ‘model to follow’ for her daughter. If I could do anything good for her daughter’s studying, this was the most obvious ‘render’ or ‘reward’ that Yang Cui sought for the many different kinds of favours she offered me, including the one that happened in the market place regarding saving my *mianzi*.



**Figure 12 - A local butcher chopping pig feet: ‘I used to buy lard here, cheaper than other stalls.’  
(Photograph by the author)**

We turn into the local market. She then points to a pork butcher stall, above which hang pieces of lean pork, belly slices, lard, and chitterlings. It seems that neither the belly

slices nor the lard bring me any interest but the fresh sea fish stall does.

**Yang Cui:** I used to buy lard here, cheaper than other stalls.

**Shuhua:** Some fresh fish? I can cook for you today.

**The fishmonger next to me:** I guarantee they are super fresh!

**Yang Cui:** A fresh one? That should be expensive!



**Figure 13 - A local fishmonger picking fish for a customer: 'I guarantee they are super fresh!'**  
(Photograph by the author)

At the moment when the fishmonger responds to my question to Yang Cui, when we pass the fish stall, I find an expression of reluctance on Yang Cui's face. She is frowning and trying to find an excuse to 'escape' from the fish odour. A few steps away a savoury smell wafts from a braised geese delicatessen nearby; this covers the fishy odour. We approach the deli counter and we are lost in the various choices.

**Shuhua:** That's my flavour of home!

**Yang Cui:** Oh! Then let's go and buy some.

**Yang Cui:** I can't understand why you people eat goose feet! How much?

**The deli shopkeeper:** Meat 30 yuan one catty (one catty equals to half kilogram), head 32, wings 35, feet 65...

**Yang Cui:** I can't understand why the feet are so expensive! OK then, weigh a half catty of meat for us.



Figure 14 - Expensive braised geese feet: 'I can't understand why you people eat goose feet!'  
(Photograph by the author)



Figure 15 - A local braised geese delicatessen: 'Meat 30 yuan one catty, heads 32, wings 35, feet 65...'  
(Photograph by the author)



Figure 16 - A braised geese selling counter: 'OK then, scale half catty meat for me.' (Photograph by the author)

### **The tastes of home—'That's my flavour of home!'**

Braised goose, a dish loved by most of the native Chaoshanese, is my favourite as well. Being a migrant student living and studying away from home (Chaoshan) for thirteen years, doing 'anthropology at home' has a personal benefit in that I can have all kinds of comfort food. The local market in Bomaqiao provided such an intense sensorial environment as it had a variety of my comfort food. Food shopping in the market place was another moment of intense being in my fieldwork experience. It is highlighted here because it was the personal encounters that revealed an intimacy with my comfort food as my flavour of home. From the sweet and sour fresh olives to the salty pickled Chinese mustard (gong cai), from the fresh arca inflate reeve to the oncemelania, various kinds of tropical-costal food shape a unique foodscape. Such a foodscape is so familiar to me that it makes me feel like being-at-home.

However, all of these Chaoshan local foods that make my mouth water actually made Yang Cui feel sick. She disliked fresh olives because of their sour and harsh taste, and both the arca inflate reeve and oncemelania reminded her of diarrhoea experiences after



having local seafood. As for the pickled dishes such as ‘*gong cai*’, they made no sense to her in the absence of any spicy flavour.



**Figure 17 - Chaoshan fresh olive side dish sold in the local market (Photograph by the author)**



**Figure 18 - Chaoshan arca inflata side dish sold in the local market (Photograph by the author)**





**Figure 19 - A shellfish stall selling oncomelania and clam in the local market (Photograph by the author)**



**Figure 20 - A close-up of the oncomelania (Photograph by the author)**





Figure 21 - A grocery shop selling *gong cai* - Chinese mustard pickles (Photograph by the author)



Figure 22 - A chicken deli: 'No spice at all. We can buy some fresh ones...' (Photograph by the author)

Next to the grocery is a salt-baked chicken deli, which again makes my mouth water. I cannot help but try to buy some.

**Shuhua:** How about some salt-baked chicken?

**Yang Cui:** No spice at all. We can buy some fresh ones and I will cook them for you, much cheaper and spicier!

We move on and then stop in front of a fresh chicken stall. Yang Cui notices that I have been taking photos while we are shopping. She asks me to take a photo of the chicken lined up on a stall, similar to how quite often she suggested to me that I take notes on certain comments that she has made—or not take notes.

**Yang Cui:** Come! Take (a photo of) this one! You should take this one!

**Shuhua:** They are singing in silence, dancing in stillness.

I make a joke as a response to Yang Cui, and try to persuade her again to take over the ‘photography job’. But she refuses again, politely.



**Figure 23 - Chickens lining up on a local stand: ‘They are singing in silence, dancing in stillness.’  
(Photograph by the author)**



While we are buying chicken, I hear a conversation at the next stall, which is a pork butcher.

**A customer:** No pig kidney again? No heart?

**The butcher:** Not available for these two months. The Year of the Dragon brings us lots of dragon sons!



Figure 24 - A local pork butcher's stall: 'The Year of the Dragon brings us lots of dragon sons!'  
(Photograph by the author)

### **The politics of food—'No pig kidney again? No heart?'**

'No pig kidney again? No heart?' The customer asked with her face filled with surprise. Maybe because she thought that she had arrived at the market at such an early time (before seven o'clock in the morning) that she would have the chance to get some pig kidney or heart. I was surprised as well: Why are pig kidney and heart so popular in the local market? How is the Year of the Dragon linked to the scarceness of pig kidneys and hearts in the local food market in Bomaqiao? How does this foodway of kidney and heart appear? What are its cognitive processes? What is the story behind it?

This is how the story goes (as I was told by the butcher). In Chaoshan, many people believe the food politics of *yi-xing-zhi-xing*: eating a specific part of certain animals can strengthen the counterpart of the human body. For example, eating fish head is good for curing headache; eating pig kidneys will strengthen one's kidney and eating pig hearts will strengthen one's heart. So pig kidneys and hearts are very expensive in the local markets. Buying expensive food for mothers-to-be or young mothers is a way of showing one's love and great concern for them, while it is also good for their kidneys and hearts. The pig kidneys and hearts available in the Bomaqiao local market could not meet the growing demand as there had been a baby boom since the beginning of the year. And this was because the year of 2012 was the Chinese Year of the Dragon. Dragons are regarded as a symbol of intelligence and strength in Chinese culture. With this belief, babies (especially boys) born in the Year of the Dragon are said to be destined to have a successful life. China had experienced a baby boom since the beginning of the year (including Bomaqiao). This is the story behind the dialogue: 'No pig kidney again? No heart?' and 'Not available for these two months. The Year of the Dragon brings us lots of dragon sons'. Similar 'stories' could be easily found on the local market streets.

As we move on, Yang Cui and I pass a stall alongside the street, which is selling dog meat, heads, and organs, hanging on a simple steel pipe shelf. Next to the shelf is a signboard on which is written 'Dog meat for sale', with detailed 'instructions' above the signboard: Eating dog head cures headache and dizziness; Eating dog stomach cures gastric acid and stomach cold; Eating dog testes and penis cures premature ejaculation and impotence; Eating dog fetuses prevents miscarriage; Eating dog meat boosts *yang* (in contrast with *yin*), enhances the *qi* (vital energy) balance, and strengthens bodies. After another few steps, there is a local alcohol shop selling various kinds of animal alcohol with different functions, namely, 'To relieve rigidity of muscles, activate collaterals and expel wind-damp', 'To prolong life and anti-aging', and 'To nourish *yin* and strengthen *yang*'.



Figure 25 - The local market selling dog meat, heads, and organs (Photograph by the author)



Figure 26 - A local alcohol stall (Photograph by the author)





**Figure 27 - Fish heads are expensive food in the local market (Photograph by the author)**



**Figure 28 - A local vegetables stall selling mustard leaf (Photograph by the author)**



Figure 29 - A local vegetable stall selling Chinese broccoli (Photograph by the author)

Seeing a local vegetable stall selling mustard leaf and Chinese broccoli, Yang Cui pulls me towards it:

**Yang Cui:** Some Chinese broccoli?

**Shuhua:** But aren't they much more expensive than over there?

**Yang Cui:** Yeah...En... But then will you be *mei-mianzi* (have no social face)? I know you people care for your faces a lot.

**Shuhua:** Oh, not for me! Let's go buy the cheap one!

We smile at each other, understanding each other without any more words, and head to the next street—the migrants' market. Within less than five minutes, Yang Cui has brought one Chinese cabbage, some spicy chillies and some Sichuan *liangpi* (bean thread with Sichuan flavour). In the migrants' market, Yang Cui shows great confidence and is very relaxed. She greets vendors here and there with her smiling face. She seems a different person compared to the one she was in the local market, when she was silent and felt uncomfortable. When we turn into the migrants' market street, she even asks voluntarily to 'take over' the photographic 'task', just as she tells me: 'I feel comfortable



to take pictures here, since we are none of us locals’.



**Figure 30 - The migrants’ market: ‘I feel comfortable to take pictures here.’ (Photograph by Yang Cui)**



**Figure 31 - We are buying vegetable at the migrants’ market (Photograph by Yang Cui)**





Figure 32 - A vegetable stall in the migrants' market (Photograph by Yang Cui)



Figure 33 - Yang Cui bought some spicy chillies from this stall (Photograph by Yang Cui)





Figure 34 - Non-local street food selling by a migrant (Photo by Yang Cui)

### Being-at-home in the migrants' market

From the migrants' market, Yang Cui could always find her 'home food', or comfort food; similar to how I could easily find my 'tastes of home' from the locals' market. Since memories can be created and re-created in a sensorial milieu (Codesal 2008), the senses generated the familiar food from the migrants' market may recall their original sensations, as the sense of being-at-home.

For Yang Cui, the migrants' market is not only a place selling 'home food' that is comfortable and familiar to her, it is also somewhere where she feels at ease. What makes Yang Cui feel at ease? From her narrative of her personal feelings ('I feel comfortable to take pictures here') to the reasons why she has such feelings ('since we are none of us locals'), the subject moves from an 'I' to a 'we', from an individual sense of 'I feel' to a collective identity of 'we are'. It is the 'we' (the migrants, the non-locals) that shapes 'here' (the migrants' market) into becoming a space of comfort and a place that is separate from 'there' (the locals' market), which is uncomfortable to her. In this

discourse, the ‘we’ not only refers to the migrant workers who come from the same village or the same province as Yang Cui, it also includes migrants from all over the nation, as long as they are not local. To some extent, the ‘we’ is a shared identity that is created to distinguish the non-locals (all of the migrants) from the locals, the selves (we migrants) from the others (you locals). Such a separation is like an invisible wall, enclosing the migrants’ market so that it is a space for the migrants—the non-locals—to have a sense of being-at-home, in terms of having a sense of the self and a sense of belonging.

On the way back to the courtyard-house where we are staying, Yang Cui also buys some fine dried noodles from a noodle shop run by migrants in the migrants’ market. While local people regard rice as the staple food, for most of the migrants from other provinces, noodles are the staple of their diet. With more and more migrant workers moving to Bomaqiao in recent decades, and the increasing demand for noodles in their everyday meals, there are more and more noodle shops in the migrants’ market, which is shaping a new staple foodscape in the Bomaqiao market place.



**Figure 35 - A noodle shop run by migrants in the migrants’ market (Photograph by the author)**



Figure 36 - Cooking sauces in Yang Cui's kitchen (Photograph by the author)

### **Food encounters in doing fieldwork**

During my twelve-month-long period of participant-observation, working in the toy factory and living together with the migrant workers, most of the time I had meals together with my informants, either eating out in the migrants' restaurants or eating meals cooked by Yang Cui or Xiao Bin. Unfortunately, even after a year, my stomach still could not adapt to the food that the migrant workers could enjoy a lot. Usually, they preferred spicy and salty food, which always upset my stomach. Frequently, I had stomach ache or diarrhoea after having an everyday meal with them. There were often flies around. Usually, their (our) everyday meal was rather simple and cheap. Nevertheless, over a year, I did encounter two feasts, one with migrant workers (as shown in Figure 40) and one with my local host family (Figure 41). Figure 40 shows the wedding feast of A Tian and Xiao Xia (two of my informants, migrant workers) and Figure 41 shows the seafood hotpot feast that I had in Chen Ma's house.





**Figure 37 - Spicy chilli that Yang Cui used for cooking one dish (Photograph by the author)**



**Figure 38 - A lunch in Yang Cui's room (Photograph by the author)**



**Figure 39 - A lunch in Master He's room, with many flies around the food (Photograph by the author)**



**Figure 40 - The wedding feast of A Tian and Xiao Xia in a migrants' restaurant (Photograph by the author)**





Figure 41 - The seafood hotpot in Chen Ma's house (Photograph by the author)

During my two-month-long period of *qiaopi* archival research, when I spent time visiting households in Bomaqiao with Nanyang (Southeast Asia) connections, my food encounters ranged from eating local daily meals to helping to prepare food offerings for various ritual practices: a shift from learning the Chaoshan traditional foodways from real life to learning them from *qiaopi* letters. In the next section, I will elaborate this special kind of family letter called *qiaopi*, which is sent back home by overseas Chinese migrants.





**Figure 42 - A pig head painted red, with a tail on the top as offering (Photograph by the author)**



Figure 43 - A 'bun mountain' as offering (Photograph by the author)





Figure 44 - Food offerings to worship ancestors (Photograph by the author)



Figure 45 - A common offering in Chaoshan and in Nanyang Chaoshan communities: *Ang tor kueh* (red rice peach), as peach is a highly regarded symbolic fruit for longevity (Photograph by the author)

## 4. Timescape

### *Qiaopi* as Shared Memory in Bomaqiao

*As traditional memory has vanished, we have felt called upon to accumulate fragments, reports, documents, images and speeches—any tangible sign of what was—as if this expanding dossier might some day be subpoenaed as evidence before who knows what tribunal of history.*

-- Pierre Nora (1996: 9)

#### A moment of being from a piece of *qiaopi* news

'*Qiaopi* are documents—letters, reports, account books and remittance receipts—resulting from communication between Chinese migrants overseas and their families in China... Recently, *qiaopi* archives have successfully been included in the Asia Pacific Memory of the World Register... The next goal is to be included in the Memory of the World Register next year... in order to reveal the value of *qiaopi* to the whole world.'

It is 7:33pm on a hot and humid summer evening. I hear the commentary in Chaoshan dialect from the most popular local daily TV programme 'The Line of Sight Today', while we (Yang Cui, Xiao Bin and me) are having supper in the courtyard. I rise from the table and go up to the television in Grandma Chang's room with my bowl and chopsticks in hand. Grandma Chang is watching the programme, as this is one of her daily routines. When I step into her room and smile at her, I see that her eyes are glistening with tears. Immediately I feel that her response to the news with tears is somewhat incongruous with the expressive and excited voice of the anchor, who is using words like 'successfully' and 'next goal'. For a fleeting moment, I find that this piece of news from such a popular local TV programme has far-reaching implications.

To millions of older people in Chaoshan who are families of overseas Chinese like Grandma Chang, such news or even just the word '*qiaopi*' being broadcast in the news, is emotionally fraught. They have an intimate relationship with *qiaopi*. *Qiaopi*

were part of their everyday lives in the past: from anxiously awaiting a piece of *qiaopi* with remittance for the survival of their families to reading a piece of *qiaopi* with joyful tears or sadness. With the disappearance of *qiaopi* correspondence, these days *qiaopi* have become their life's memories—memories of each individual.

However, in such news, *qiaopi* are represented as a 'shared' memory—a Memory of the World. As Mr. Wang Weizhong, the curator of the *Qiaopi* Archive in Shantou just said on the screen: 'The uniqueness, authenticity and irreplaceability of *qiaopi* qualify them to be part of our collective heritage, our common memory'. 'How?' I say to myself. Since one's memory is in his or her head, where is shared memory? Why can we talk about memory being shared? I wonder...

Field-note July 2<sup>nd</sup> 2012

This is an extract from my field notes on July 2<sup>nd</sup> 2012, concerning the news that *qiaopi* had been included in the *Asia Pacific Memory of the World Register*. Approximately one year later, in June 2013, *qiaopi* became documentary heritage on the list of *Memory of the World Register*, ranked by the UNESCO.<sup>31</sup>

In what follows, I will take a closer look at what *qiaopi* are, in the past and in the present, how the enormous amount of historical documentation 'constructs' a 'shared' memory—as I wondered when I made the field note, and how I experienced the timescape of the past-present, particularly in doing archival research on *qiaopi*.

### **An example of a piece of *qiaopi***

Instead of giving a rather dry definition of *qiaopi* in words, let me 'show' it in a more vivid way, with a piece of *qiaopi*. This is a piece of *qiaopi* written in 1930 by a migrant (Ma) and sent from Singapore to his homeland in Chaoshan. It includes the enclosed family letter and the *qiaopi* envelope. According to his descendants, Jinquan Ma migrated as a labour worker from Chaoshan to Singapore in 1921, leaving his parents, wife and two sons at home. He did not return to his homeland in Chaoshan until 1947. During these years, he sent a *qiaopi* home almost every month. Below is one of the hundreds he sent:

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<sup>31</sup> Here is the web page of *Memory of the World* that includes *qiaopi* in the list of registered heritage: <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/communication-and-information/flagship-project-activities/memory-of-the-world/register/access-by-region-and-country/asia-and-the-pacific/china/>.

Dear and respected parents,

Please accept my blessing. I, who am respectfully writing to you, was so glad to hear from you on the 18<sup>th</sup> last month. I, your son, as a guest here far away from home, was extremely glad to know that you were in good health and everything went well at home. I hope that our homeland Zhangdong is at peace as well.

I know that there will be a ship returning to Shantou today. So, I attached thirty yuan with this letter. Please check it then. Here are the details to each family members: one yuan for my eldest uncle, one yuan for my eldest aunt, one yuan for my sixteenth aunt<sup>32</sup>, one yuan for my eldest sister, one yuan for my mother-in-law, four yuan for my parents, two yuan for Chen shi [Ma's wife], and four yuan for my two sons. These are fifteen yuan in total. The other fifteen yuan will be useful for maintaining the household.

I kowtow to pay respects to my parents!

Son: Jinquan (with squared seal of Ma Jinquan in red)

The second of the first month of the lunar year, in the Year of Geng

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<sup>32</sup> According to Ma's descendants, Ma's grandfather had seventeen children in total by his wife and a number of concubines.



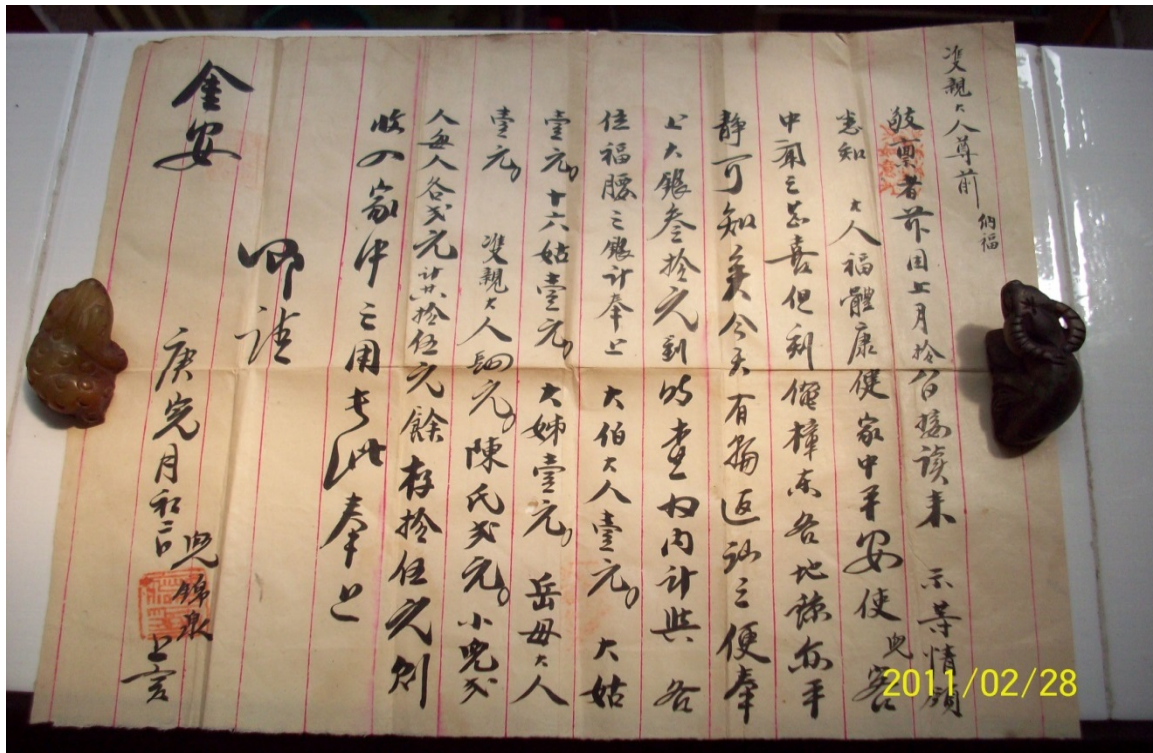


Figure 46 - The qiaopi letter (Photograph by the author)



Figure 47 - The cover of the envelope  
(Photograph by the author)

**The Envelope** [Brown paper decorated with a Chinese scenery painting in read]

**Mailing Address:** [Calligraphy writing on the right] 'Chengyi Zhanglin Nanshe Gonghou chang Machu Clan'

**Receiver:** [Calligraphy writing in the middle] 'Dear and respected parents'

**Postscript:** [Calligraphy writing on the left top] 'Attached with thirty yuan'

**\*Sender:** [Calligraphy writing on the left bottom] 'From Jinquan Ma' (with a squared seal of 'Ma Jinquan' in red)

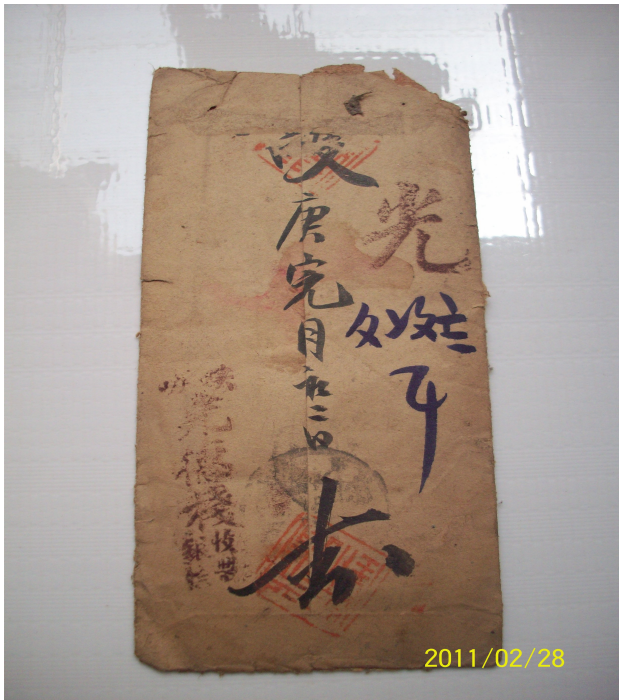


Figure 48 - The back of the envelope  
(Photograph by the author)

**\*Abbreviation for the postal agency:**

[Seal on the right]  
'Guang' (short for 'Guangde zhan', one of the private postal agencies in Singapore)

**\*Date of delivery:**

[Calligraphy writing in the middle]  
'The second of the first month of the lunar year, in the Year of Geng' [1930] (with two squared seals of Jinquan Ma in red)

**\*Seals of customs:**

[A round seal in the middle in black]  
Unclear details

**\*Name of the postal agency:**

[Seal on the leaf] 'Guangde zhan'

The concretised entity of *qiaopi* is a kind of texture that is crafted on the surface of letter papers using brush and ink in the practice of classical Chinese correspondence writing, with vertical columns from top to bottom and from right to left. Mainly written with brush and ink, many *qiaopi* can be appreciated for their aesthetic value. In his book *Chaoshan Qiaopi Shangxi (Chaoshan Qiaopi Appreciation)* (2011), *qiaopi* collector and expert Zhang Meisheng argues for *qiaopi* as art and possessing aesthetic value on the basis of the beauty of the calligraphy, the elegance of the language, and the refinement of the stamps and postmarks. It must be noted, however, that many *qiaopi* that are ornamental in their calligraphy were not written by the Nanyang migrants themselves, but by *daixie* (dictation for the illiterate) agents, who wrote *qiaopi* on behalf of the Nanyang migrants or who wrote *qiaopi* replies on behalf of the migrants' families in China.

*Daixie* means writing on behalf of somebody (*dai* means on one's behalf in Chinese; *xie*, means writing in Chinese). *Daixie* was a profession that developed along with the *qiaopi* business, especially in the early period from the 1870s to the 1910s, during the first flow of Nanyang migration—*Zhuzai* Trade (Piglets Trade). It was because of the



large number of migrants and their poor working conditions in Southeast Asia that these male-labour<sup>33</sup> migrants were labelled ‘piglets’. Most of the Nanyang migrants in the Piglets Trade were illiterate or lacking in skills of writing. In order to send messages to their families, they were frequently dependent on the assistance of others and they paid them to write *qiaopi* on their behalf. Hence, *qiaopi* remittance bureaus offered a service counter in writing *qiaopi*, for the migrants to dictate to their scribes. Besides the bureaus, some individual skilful scribes (named *Xiu Cai*<sup>34</sup> in Chinese) also provided this service in the villages in Chaoshan.

Usually, *qiaopi* written by *daixie* are in good handwriting. For those *qiaopi* not written by *daixie*, some are written in rather unpractised writing, mix homophones of local dialects, and contain many errors. The following copies of *qiaopi* will show us both *qiaopi* with elegant calligraphy and some with unpractised handwriting:

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<sup>33</sup> The Piglets Trade mainly covered male-labour and occasionally traded in women, which was called ‘*Zhuhua*’, literally meaning pig flowers.

<sup>34</sup> *Xiu Cai* was the title of a scholar who passed the imperial exam at the county level in the Ming and Qing dynasties in China.

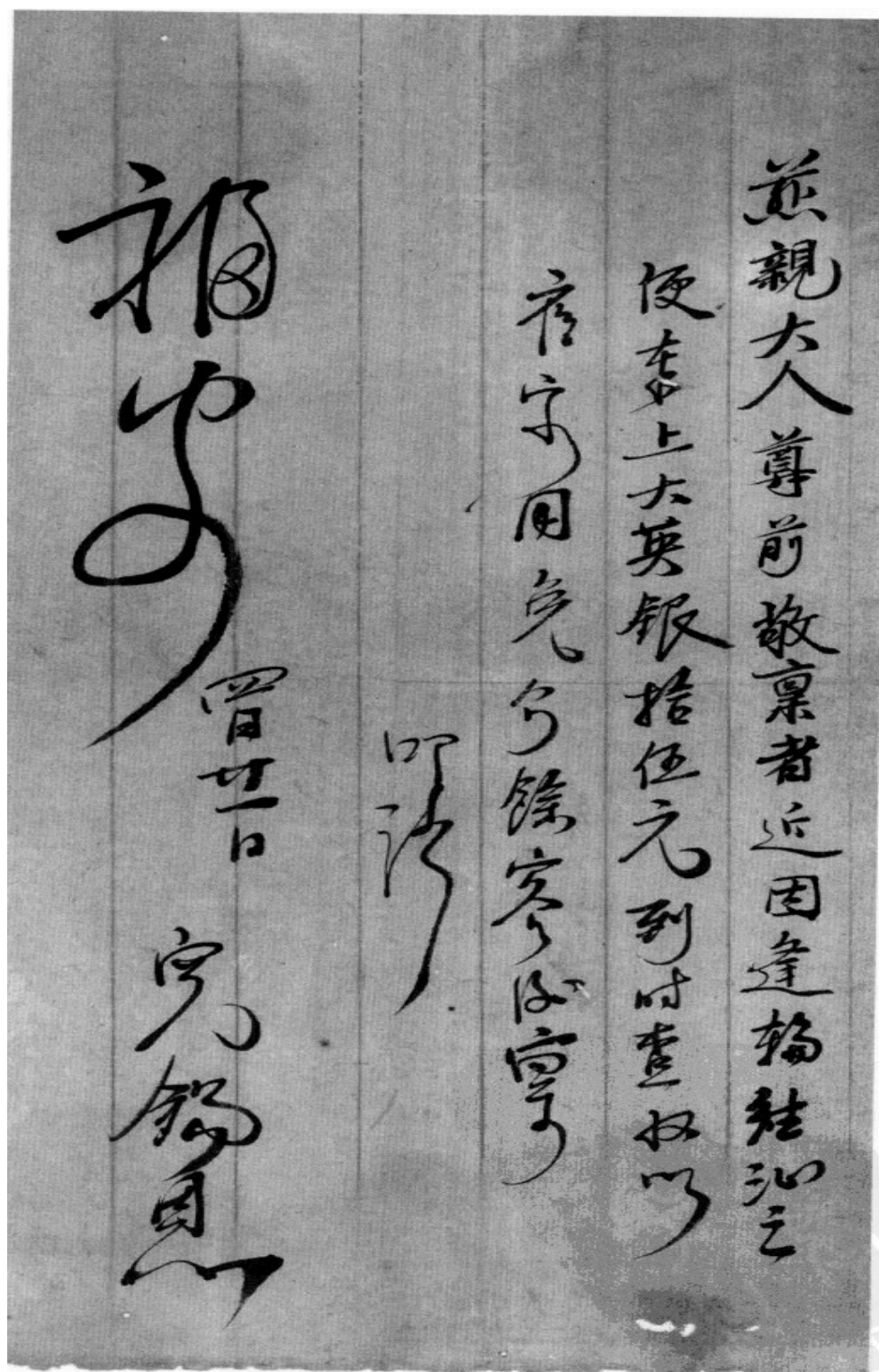


Figure 49 - Example of *qiaopi* with elegant calligraphy [1] (Photograph by the author)

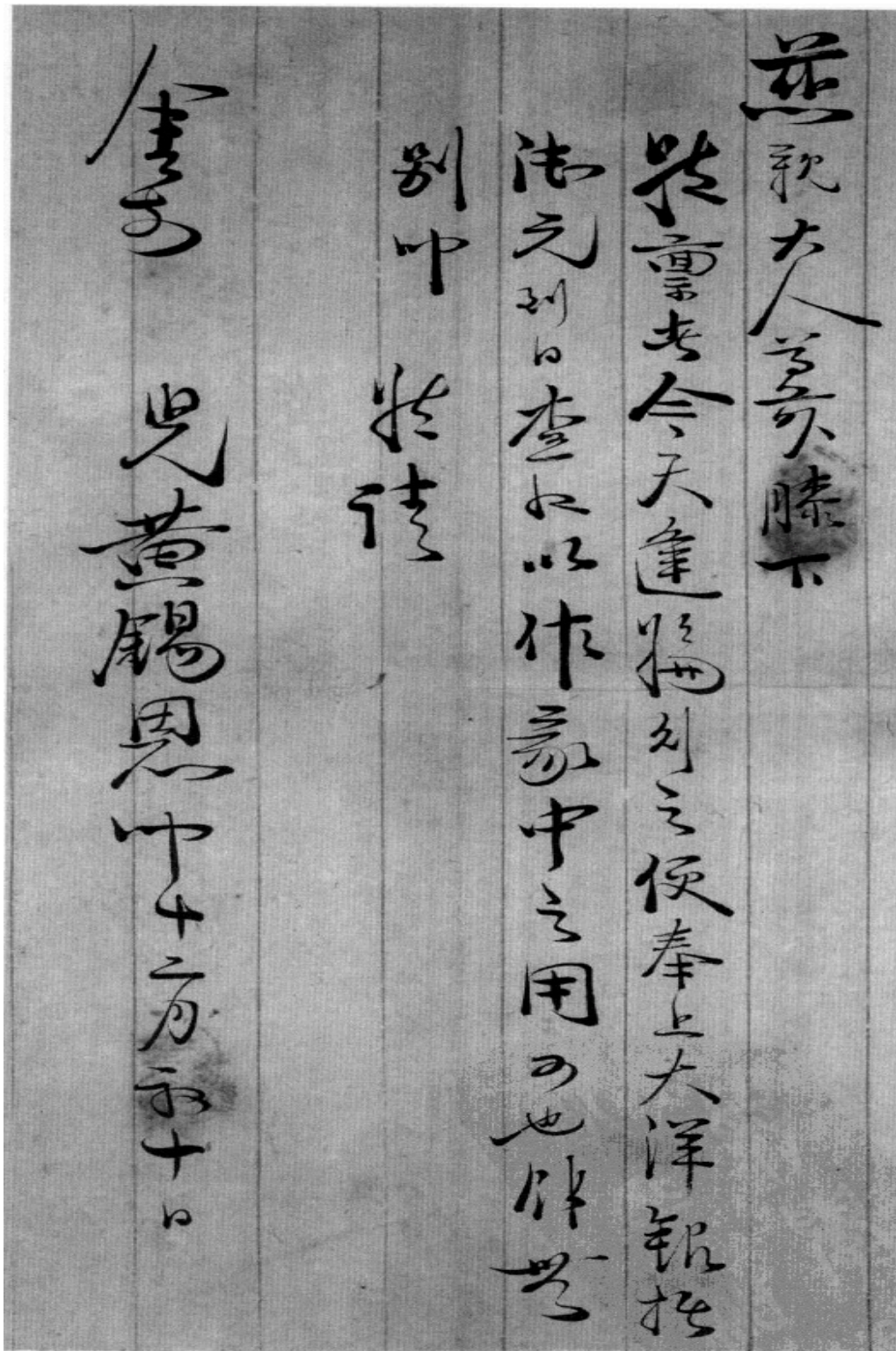


Figure 50- Example of *qiaopi* with elegant calligraphy [2] (Photograph by the author)



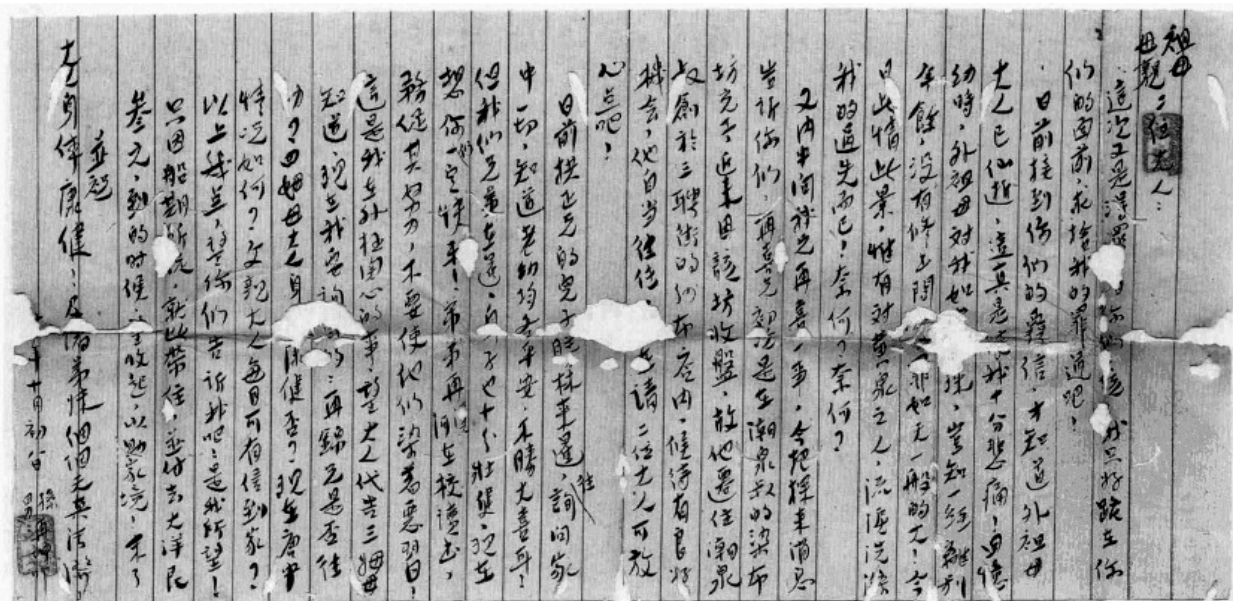


Figure 52 - Example of *qiaopi* with ordinary handwriting (Photograph by the author)

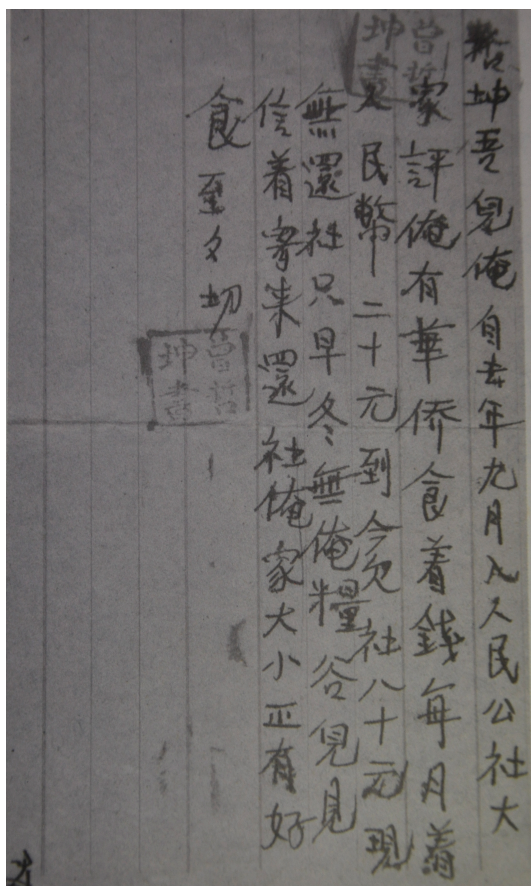


Figure 51 - Example of *qiaopi* with unpractised handwriting [1] (Photograph by the author)



Figure 53 - Example of *qiaopi* with unpractised handwriting [2] (Photograph by the author)

### ***Qiaopi* as legacy of the Nanyang migration**

*Qiaopi* are remittance receipts in the form of family letters from overseas Chinese to their families in China. They usually contain messages that include a specific amount of remittances, along with instructions for their usage and distribution. That is, *qiaopi* are a special kind of family letters that accompany the process of remitting money earned abroad. The word *qiaopi* is composed of two Chinese characters: *qiao*, which means ‘emigrants’ in Chinese, and *pi*, meaning ‘letters’ in Minnan (southern Fujian dialect). People from southern Fujian and the Chaoshan region in Guangdong also call *qiaopi* ‘*fanpi*’ (foreign letters) or ‘*pi*’ (letters). *Qiaopi* are also known as ‘*yinxin*’ (which literally means ‘money letters’) in the Wuyi areas of the Cantonese-speaking region in Guangdong province in China.

The word ‘*qiaopi*’ has commonly been used since the late nineteenth century in southern Fujian and the Chaoshan region of northeast Guangdong. The political chaos of the late Qing dynasty (1840-1911), which coincided with a great demand for labour in Southeast Asia (Nanyang), resulted in the migration of massive populations from Guangdong and Fujian to Southeast Asia, and onwards to Australia, the Americas, and Europe. This massive labour emigration from southern China to Southeast Asia was commonly referred to as *Xia Nanyang* (migration to Southeast Asia) or the Nanyang migration (1860s-1970s) (Chen 2009). For almost all of the Chinese Nanyang migrants, the main purpose of their migration was to earn income for their family in China. Therefore, enormous overseas remittances from Nanyang to China occurred from the beginning of the Nanyang migration.

The *qiaopi*-delivery business proliferated throughout the Nanyang migration movement. It began with privately arranged remittance deliveries by individuals called *shuike* (couriers by sea). Later, it came to resemble a more formal postal service, operated by privately-owned overseas Chinese remittance bureaus. Eventually, in 1979, it was incorporated into the Chinese national banking system.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Before the *qiaopi* delivery business was merged into the national banking system, both individual couriers and privately-owned companies made their businesses possible by basing them on the principle of honesty. Usually, *qiaopi* deliverers carried both the *qiaopi* letter and the money, and had to trudge to remote villages in mountain areas to deliver them.





Figure 54 - The first *qiaopi* bureau in Chaoshan, set up in 1850s - *Zhicheng Piguan* (Photograph by the author)

### ***Qiaopi* as archives of the Nanyang migration history**

Nowadays, with Nanyang migration reduced to a trickle, the *qiaopi* business has faded away. *Qiaopi* are historical products of the Nanyang migration and a legacy of overseas Chinese migrants. In the Chaoshan region, in the 1990s, private individuals began collecting *qiaopi*, initially for the stamps, but they later realised the historical value of the letters' contents. In 1994, the Chaoshan History and Cultural Research Centre started to collect, organise and preserve *qiaopi*, either from unpaid donations or paid collections and photocopies. In March 2010, the Chaoshan *qiaopi* were recognized as part of the official Chinese archive, belonging to the National Archive Resource system. The *Qiaopi* Wenwu Guan (*Qiaopi* Archives) in Shantou was founded in April 2004 within the building of the Chaoshan History and Cultural Research Centre. In July 2013, the new *Qiaopi* Archive was relocated to the old city centre, and it now covers an area of 2,000

square meters over three floors, in which is included four exhibition sections and one archive section.

The exhibition has four sections. On the ground floor, the first section, Special Background, is dedicated to the history of international migration from the Chaoshan region of northeast Guangdong to Hong Kong, Macao, Taiwan and Southeast Asia; and from there onwards to Australia, the Americas, and Europe, particularly from the late Qing dynasty (1840-1911). It is mainly a photographic exhibition focusing on the hardships faced by overseas Chinese in their migratory journey by sea, the difficulty of their lives abroad, and their efforts to save every penny for their families in China. Objects that were brought from overseas by *shuike* (individual couriers by sea) have also been selected by the museum to illustrate the history. The second section, Special Operation, shows how the *qiaopi* business came into being through *shuike* delivery through a collection of objects and some early *qiaopi* during the late Qing dynasty. On the first floor, the third section, Special Ties, captures the development of the *qiaopi* business over a century—operated by privately-owned overseas Chinese remittance bureaus—and eventually incorporated into the Chinese national banking system in 1979. This is sourced from many original pieces of *qiaopi*. This section also tells individual stories narrated through *qiaopi*. On the second floor, there are two exhibits. These consist of the fourth section, Special Heritage, which demonstrates the recent journey of how the *qiaopi* archives came to be assessed by UNESCO as part of the world's documentary heritage.

In the archive section, there are more than 120,000 pieces of *qiaopi*, including over 40,000 pieces of original manuscripts and other scanned copies. The published volumes cataloguing the contents of the archive also serve as a great research tool for *qiaopi* studies. These include, *Chaoshan Qiaopi Cuibian* (Chaoshan *Qiaopi* Anthology) [3 volumes], *Chaoshan Qiaopi Dan'an Xuanbian* (Chaoshan *Qiaopi* Archives Selection) [5 volumes], and *Chaoshan Qiaopi Jicheng* (Chaoshan *Qiaopi* Collection) [72 volumes, including the first and the second series]. The third series of *Chaoshan Qiaopi Jicheng* [over 60 volumes] is currently in the process of production. All of these volumes are compilations of *qiaopi* copies. They have been sourced from over 100,000 pieces of *qiaopi*. Most of the *qiaopi* were sent by overseas Chinese from Thailand, Singapore,

Malaysia, Indonesia, Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, the Philippines and Burma. The principal means of cataloguing is by the mailing address of the *qiaopi* recipients, arranged by county, town, village, and then family.

Most of the *qiaopi* in the archive are open to the public and researchers; in some circumstances, access to original documents may be restricted depending on the physical condition of the documents.<sup>36</sup> The preservation and collection of tens of thousands of *qiaopi* in such a specially constructed archive represents the constitution of a form of collective consciousness.



Figure 55 - Piles of Chaoshan *qiaopi* archives (Photograph by the author)

### ***Qiaopi* as collective memory**

Besides open access to the ‘collective consciousness’ in the form of the archive (building), *qiaopi* as an archive also ‘spread’ to the Chaoshan ordinary people through other ‘media’ in the form of remembering. Unlike archives that are relatively fixed,

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<sup>36</sup> If the physical condition of the original pieces is fragile, digitised documents or photocopies are made available to researchers. Although it is permitted to take photographs in the exhibition halls within the museum, visiting researchers must request permission to take photographs within the archives.



memory is an essentially creative process since remembering the past means it always comes out differently (Platt 2012). The act of remembering is creative and memories can change from time to time and from person to person. Nevertheless, collective memory plays an important role in framing and shaping the memory of individuals (Connerton 1989). Collective memory can be ‘fixed’ and made tangible, as in the establishment of the *Qiaopi* Museum. Beyond the ‘dead’ archive as past experience, collective memory exists in various forms in living society as part of the everyday lives of the Chaoshan people.

Here are two examples of local ballads demonstrating the collective memory of Nanyang migration and *qiaopi* in folk literature:

[1]

一船目汁一船人，  
一条浴布去过番。  
钱银知寄人知转，  
勿忘父母共妻房。

*A full boat of tears, a full boat of men;  
One travels overseas just with a scrap of wash-cloth.  
Do not just send money back but also yourself;  
Do not forget your parents and your wife in the bridal chamber.*

[2]

批一封，银二元。  
叫妻刻苦勿愁烦，  
仔儿着支持教伊勿赌钱，  
田园着缴种，  
猪仔哩着饲。  
待到赚有猛猛归家来团圆。

*A piece of qiaopi, two yuan of note.  
Asking my wife:  
to work hard and do not worry,  
to nurture the children and warn them not to gamble,*

*to farm the field and feed the pigs.*

*I will return home to a reunion as soon as I make good money.*

These are lines from Chaoshan folk ballads describing the Nanyang migration and the common mind-set of this regional history. The lines describe the hardship faced by the Nanyang migrants sailing overseas. It was saddening because many died on the way before they could even land. However, there were still many people who left home in search of a better life for their families. With the pioneering spirit of hard struggle, they risked their lives to travel overseas taking almost nothing with them, as the ballad vividly tells us—‘one travels overseas just with a scrap of wash cloth’. More importantly, these lines reveal the central concerns of the people (both of the sojourners in Nanyang and their families in Chaoshan): making money and sending *qiaopi* home; leaving home in order to make home.

Besides popular ballads, *qiaopi* are also expressed still in Chaoshan people’s daily lives. On the seventh day of the first month of the lunar year, Chaoshan people have a traditional ritual: picking (usually buying), and cooking seven different kinds of vegetables and then eating them with all of their family. In Chaoshan folklore, it is said that:

There was an old man in Chaozhou, whose son migrated to Southeast Asia on the seventh of the first month of the lunar year and did not return for many years. The old man missed his son so much that every year on that day, he always added one more pair of chopsticks while setting the table, waiting for his son to come home. One year, because he had no money to buy any food, the old man picked up seven kinds of residual vegetable leaves from a vegetable stall for free and got back home to cook them together, and put them on a table. He added one extra pair of chopsticks as usual. Right at that moment, a *pijiao* (*qiaopi* deliverer) arrived and passed him a piece of *qiaopi* from his son with remittance. From that year, the date (the seventh day of the first month of the lunar year) has been called and celebrated as the ‘Seven-vegetable Festival’.

Moreover, *qiaopi* have recently become widely known in Chaoshan through broadcasts by the *Line of Sight Today*, a prime-time TV news programme with a high local audience rating. It is an ordinary people's livelihood programme broadcast by a local TV channel and local radio channel. Reporting in a Chaoshan dialect makes it especially welcome to the Chaoshan elders, who may only know this local dialect and not Mandarin. News from this programme also reaches the younger generation through car radios, as we listened to it many times during my fieldwork while friends were giving me a lift.

During the fourteen months of my fieldwork, frequently, when my informants or strangers from the village heard that my research topic on migrant life included *qiaopi*, they immediately directed me to some nearby villages where a great quantity of *qiaopi* could be found. Out of curiosity, I always asked them how they came to know *qiaopi*, especially those in the younger generation. I know that most elders in Chaoshan are very aware of *qiaopi*, as it used to be very important in their livelihoods. But, how did the younger generation come to know *qiaopi*? Most of them told me that they learned about it from the news by the *Line of Sight Today*, since the programme broadcast news about *qiaopi* many times in the last two years, ranging from the historical story of Nanyang migration to the *qiaopi* business: from the hard work on the *qiaopi* archival collection to its achievement in becoming a 'Memory of the World'. As it has been reported again and again in recent years by such an 'all-pervasive' news programme, ordinary Chaoshan people have become familiar with the local history of Nanyang migration and its legacy—*qiaopi*. Therefore, piles of *qiaopi*, which were shrouded in dust for half a century or more, have reappeared in people's lives with an outstanding new 'identity' as a 'Memory of the World'.

### **Reaching to the past: Individual stories between the lines of *qiaopi***

In the past, *qiaopi* were created by overseas Chinese in order to send remittances and messages to their families. Nowadays, having been collected and reorganised, pieces of these inscriptions have been re-purposed as a kind of shared memory, and are 'stored' both in *qiaopi* archive buildings and in people's minds. Being identified through 'immaterialising' the material, *qiaopi* as a 'Memory of the World' represent a collective consciousness that is constructed by the numerous archival documents—the archives

which document individuals' life stories.

Geertz (1993: 10) argues that culture is an 'acted document' and thus 'doing ethnography is like trying to read a manuscript'. He states that all ethnographers are in a sense merely readers whose 'texts' happen to take a more practical form. Following the same logic but travelling in the opposite direction, to read a piece of *qiaopi* for me has, in some respects, the sense of conducting a 'silent interview'. Instead of stepping onto real land, I put my feet between the lines of *qiaopi* letters. Doing *qiaopi* archival research enables me to step into the past and get a glimpse of the individual stories of people in the past, and their nostalgia, filiality or hardship inscribed between the lines.

The *qiaopi* archives as a dimension of constructing the 'field'—as epistemological ground—therefore enabled the 'multi-temporal' ethnography to be conducted in the same geographic site while thickening the ethnographic-field with its historical depth. 'The historical material enables us to trace thousands of individuals, rather than tens, and to follow them through their whole lives in a number of cases' (Macfarlane 1977: 202).<sup>37</sup>

In my *qiaopi* archival research, I also ask: How much of the ordinary lives of the Chinese diaspora can we recover from what has been buried in the official histories? How might we reconstruct the consciousness of particular members of the Chinese diaspora from what has been preserved in *qiaopi* writing? What kind of resource—theoretical, ethnographical and methodological—do the *qiaopi* archives represent to anthropology? The *qiaopi* archives enabled me to construct what historian Martyn Lyons (2013) calls 'new history from below'. Different from the official archives, the texts of *qiaopi* are preserved in the 'language' of ordinary people, which, while not necessarily identical to spoken language, nevertheless preserves many artefacts from it. The 'people' whom I studied are 'ordinary' members of the Chinese diaspora—at least inasmuch as any human being can be reduced to 'ordinary' status. By studying both the significant and (seemingly) trivial details of ordinary lives, my research attempts to reframe *qiaopi* in Chinese historiography as a dynamic process of coming-into-being rather than as static artefacts of a bygone age.

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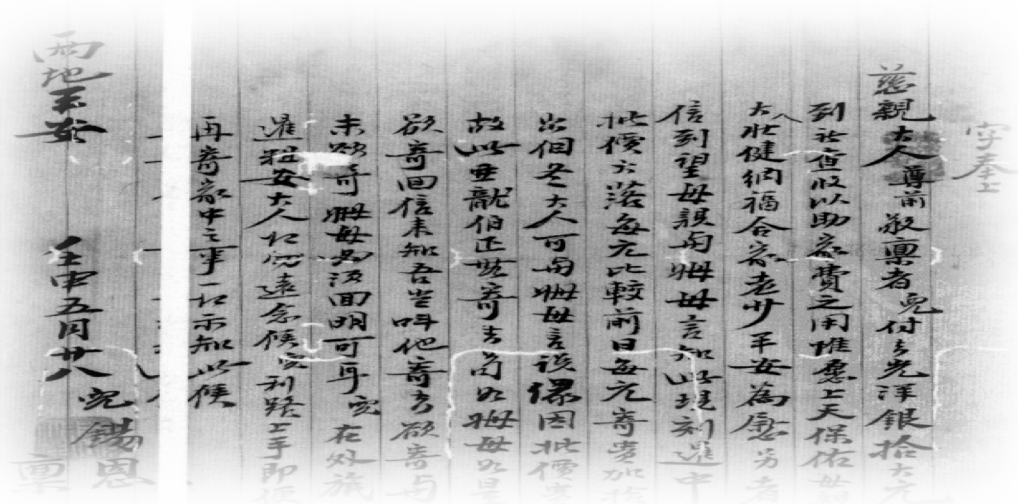
<sup>37</sup> In order to understand and reconstruct English historical communities and to make an anthropological argument, Macfarlane (1970, 1977) uses the diary of an Earls Colne inhabitant, Ralph Josselin, who was vicar of the parish and resident from 1641 to 1683. In *The Origins of English Individualism*, Macfarlane (1978) also proves to us the great value of using historical documents in anthropological study.

In sum, *qiaopi* narrate a continually creative process that is being as a practice of the sojourning experience in the past and as a shared memory in the present. Within the process, the past-present is crafted as a timescape. In other words, the timescape of the *qiaopi* crafted in Bomaqiao (largely in the Chaoshan region) both reveals the process of how time is being *scaped*, and highlights the very *scape* of time—the time that is frozen in the material forms as remittance letters in the past and archives in the present for visitors (including researchers like me) to experience.

## Chapter Two

### Writing *Qiaopi*, Making Home

#### *Fresh From the Qiaopi Archives*



*The act of writing is nothing except the act of approaching the experience written about... and the act of approaching a given moment of experience involves both scrutiny (closeness) and the capacity to connect (distance).*

-- John Berger (1979: 6)

For migrants, how does writing family letters relate to making a home? This chapter aims to explore how migrants experience home-away-from-home and how they make home through the process of writing family letters.

Writing, as outlined in Rapport and Overing's *Social and Cultural Anthropology: The Key Concepts* (2007: 442), can be understood as 'the orderly use of symbolic forms (that is, forms which carry meaning for their user) for the making of orderly worlds.' Within this understanding, the essence of writing is composed of two things: firstly, the considered ordering of experience in a symbolic form; secondly, the conscious production of meaning from this arrangement. In other words, writing is 'a mode of

cognition which makes experience meaningful' (ibid.: 442).

From this point of view, to a migrant, writing family letters can be regarded as his or her effort to order the lived experience of home-away-from-home, in the symbolic form of words inscribed on paper. More importantly, through this process of ordering, the experience of home-away-from-home is given meaning: such ordering of the experience is articulated either as personal recognition of home or as expression of home to others, such as family. Through writing family letters, 'a set of meanings is created and retained from passing experience for further possible retrieval, amendment and elaboration' (ibid.: 443). In methodological terms, then, archival research into *qiaopi* family letters written by migrants enables me to explore their ideas of home.

Within the enormous landscape of *qiaopi*, I zoom-in to scrutinise a small subset of *qiaopi* that were written and sent by a migrant—110 pieces of *qiaopi* from Zeng, who migrated from China to Thailand in 1947 and did not return home until 1973. Along with Zeng's life story, in this chapter, I firstly address the notion of home in relation to a Confucian mode of practice: The Confucian philosophy of *xiao* (filial piety). I explore relationships between Zeng and his family members, which were fully expressed within the *qiaopi*—through *qiaopi* genre and beyond.

Through those changing relationships, I then discuss the notion of home, particularly for the Nanyang migrants and the 'dual family system' in the history of *Xia Nanyang*. I argue that the actions of writing family letters and sending remittance home are ways of making (and unmaking) home for the Chinese Nanyang migrants, through which they express and fulfil themselves while making sense of the world.

In the last section of this chapter, shifting the research focus from the socio-cultural or historical milieux that *qiaopi* may show us, I explore the way in which Zeng authored his life—that was for him simultaneously virtual and actual, imaginary and real—through *qiaopi* correspondence and his awareness and attachment to the world that was thereby created. That is, *qiaopi* is examined as a living process that inscribed their authors' (like Zeng's) individual consciousness, rather than as a frozen collective consciousness. I argue that the practice of letter-writing creates a space that is neither at home nor away sojourning, but somewhere in-between, a space for a migrant to be at home in the world. It is, I further argue, a space for cosmopolitan imagination.

## 5. Zeng's Story

### *Qiaopi* Genre and The Cultural Interpretation of *Xiao*

*A family letter is as precious as ten thousand tael.*

-- From *Spring Scene* by Du Fu<sup>38</sup>

Zeng was born in the 1920s in Bomaqiao. He was an ordinary person. He migrated to Thailand in his twenties and did not return home to China until he was in his fifties. During the 26 years he spent in Thailand from 1947 to 1973, his main objective was to send a *qiaopi* home every month to support his Chinese family, though this was always a difficult task for him. He left hundreds of *qiaopi* dealing with his life in-between his home in China and his sojourning life in Thailand. Through his enduring effort of sending *qiaopi* home, he became a 'real' man, a 'filial' son, a 'reliable' father, a husband 'to wait for', a 'tricky' son-in-law, a 'hopeless' shopkeeper, a 'miserable' sojourner, and a 'foreign guest', just to name some identities, at each moment of his life. He was constantly struggling with his sojourning life, fighting with his internal feelings about his external relationships in his world. All of his writing, documenting his struggle in his life as a migrant, his feelings about home and his concerns about future now reside in the Shantou *Qiaopi* Archive in China. His 110 pieces of *qiaopi*, which were preserved, along with others, have been collected and compiled into a series, *Chaoshan Qiaopi Dang'an Xuanbian* (*Chaoshan Qiaopi Archives Selection*) (Wang 2011), housed in the Shantou *Qiaopi* Archive. Besides the 110 pieces of *qiaopi* written by Zeng, the series also contains seven replies by Zeng's family: six from Zeng's mother and one from Zeng's son and younger sister. I draw on these 117 pieces of family letters as my primary source of ethnographic data for this chapter.

Zeng's story is a story of love, absence and time. As he spent more than twenty years away from home, the relationships between Zeng, his mother and his wife evolved over time. Moreover, during these years, his son grew from a baby to a young father in his twenties. Zeng's concerns for his son in those letters changed from naming to marriage,

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<sup>38</sup> Du Fu (712 – 770 AD) was a prominent classical Chinese poet of the Tang Dynasty (618 – 907 AD).



from buying candy to making a living. To Zeng, these changing relationships with his family are key to interpreting a particular part of his experience abroad: his constantly changing understanding of home.

### ***Qiaopi* genre: The supposed-to-have relationship**

As is evident from the 110 pieces of *qiaopi* that have been preserved, Zeng's life (mainly as a shop assistant) in Thailand was fraught with hardship. Working as a daily drudge without any job security, Zeng felt exhausted and unhappy. He was often with his family in his recollections. For example he wrote:

Dear and respected mother: It has been a few years since I bade farewell to you. I'm always lost in quiet recollection of the past each time when your kind face comes into my mind [30 March 1953]. (Wang 2011: 36)

He usually started a piece of *qiaopi* vividly with: '[d]ear and respected mother: Please read this letter as if I were kneeling down in front of you; I would like to report to you respectfully about...', '[d]ear wife: Please read this letter as if we were seeing each other...' or, '[d]ear wife: I miss you so much as if I were in front of you...'.

One may believe that words such as this kind of greeting are just a conventional style of writing in *qiaopi* correspondence. When Zeng wrote the words '[d]ear wife: Please read this letter as if I were in front of you and we were seeing each other', he might not really have been missing his wife that much. This could be true. As Zeng's *qiaopi* tell us, being separated for years was not easy either for Zeng or for his wife. Their marriage had been fraught with tension since the beginning. During those 26 years, the relationship between Zeng and his wife evolved. In the first ten years after he left home (which were also the first ten years of their marriage), his main concern with regard to his wife was that she always complied with his mother's kind advices in order that she could become a good daughter-in-law. While their relationship changed over time, Zeng changed his attitude towards his wife and mainly emphasised how grateful he was to her for taking care of his mother and looking after his own son at home.

Indeed, expressions like '[p]lease read this letter as if I were kneeling down in front of you' or '[p]lease read this letter as if I were in front of you and we were seeing each other' belong to the greeting manner of classical Chinese correspondence, which mainly shaped the *qiaopi* writing style, or writing genre.

*Genre*, a term derived from the Latin *genus*, means a type. Fredric Jameson (1981: 106, cited in Rapport and Overing 2007: 275) states that 'genres are essentially literary institutions, or social contracts between a writer and a specific public'. In this statement, Jameson points out a key issue: for a certain genre there is an agreement between a writer and a reader with regard to a relatively recognizable and established style of written work. In other words, writers of a certain genre expect that their readers will agree with the style by reading it as what it is, and they write accordingly; and vice versa, readers expect writers of a certain genre to write according to what it is supposed to be. For example, when reading a novel, readers do not usually critique the fictional characters or plots. They know that they are reading something that belongs to a genre called 'fiction'. They are not reading a piece of news, or an ethnographic account, for instance.

To some degree, this means that the *qiaopi* genre implies an agreement within the communication between the migrants as *qiaopi* writers and their family as readers. To Zeng and his wife, for instance, regardless of whether or not it is true that Zeng was missing his wife that much, both of them were momentarily—when he was writing the sentence and when she was reading it—placed in a supposed marital relationship under the migratory circumstance: *missing each other so much*. Within the moment, they opened themselves to the possibility of being in the supposed-to-have relationship: *You are my dear wife and I express my love and propriety to you*; or, to use a local term, *qingyi* (affection with propriety, or affective righteousness).

This is similar to our modern life when a couple say 'I love you' to each other every morning before going to work, with a kiss-goodbye when they are in a rush. But do they always mean that? Not necessarily. At least the emotion they have may be not as strong as when they fall in love with each other and may say 'I love you' for the first time, slowly and gently, perhaps accompanied by long-lasting eye contact and then a long kiss. In the general speeding-up of contemporary life, the busy day may not allow them to always give their partner a long-kiss before going to work in the morning; they may be

too rushed. By doing it again and again every day, the word ‘love’ and the act of giving a kiss may lose their rich meaning gradually and eventually become a daily routine for the couple. Notwithstanding, even if they just do it as a daily routine, the acts performed are still based on the mutual assumption of loving each other as a couple. Thus, although rushed, this act of ‘*supposedly I love you*’ still has an impact on their relationship, both for the day and in the long run.

Let us go back to Zeng’s case with his wife. The supposed-to-have relationship that comes from the *qiaopi* genre thus allowed Zeng and his wife to begin to work on their relationship in reality: it might have cultivated a positive mood for them to start communicating with each other—through *qiaopi* correspondence—even in intense situations. For a short while, they played their imaginary roles in the marriage as if there were no tension. The moment gave their life continuity. In the long run, the repeated practices of *qiaopi* correspondence shaped the relationship between couples who did not live together for years. Broadly speaking (not just for Zeng and his wife but also for other migrants and their families at home), *qiaopi* correspondence gradually shaped various moral landscapes such as *qingyi* (affection with propriety) or *xiao* (filial piety) between husbands and wives, among siblings, or from sons to parents.

The convention of the genre—either in the case of writing *qiaopi* or kissing—may affect individuals differently; some may be emotionally shaped by the genre—so as to actually feel what the genre indicates—but others may not. No matter how much sentiment was attached to a conventional greeting in a piece of *qiaopi*, it created a possibility for both parties (the migrants and their families) to participate in imaginary roles in the practice of *qiaopi* correspondence. With this possibility, in the process of writing of a piece of *qiaopi* a migrant’s (like Zeng’s) imagination about their family could unfold.

### **Zeng’s dilemma**

Working as an assistant in a shop owned by his cousin, Zeng felt unhappy, exhausted, and described himself as suffering disgrace and insults in Thailand. The endless hardship of everyday work and lack of a promising future brought him frustration, guilt and a sense of failure in life, as he wrote:

Dear and respected mother, ...I am ashamed of myself for being neither physically strong nor intelligently outstanding [in order to set up my own business]. To make matters worse, there is no support from any relatives or friends here... It is too miserable to express the hardship of everyday work here. [7 February 1949] (Wang 2011: 3)

Not fulfilling his ambition of setting up his own business and earning good money, he felt bad about his lack of success, as he confessed:

Dear and respected mother, ...It has been several years since I left home. I am ashamed that I cannot go back home for a visit. [7 March 1951] (ibid.: 23).

Dear and respected mother, ...I, your son now work in a friend's shop but with very little income. I still cannot run any business of my own. I feel extremely abashed. [1 May 1953] (ibid.: 37)

Besides, Zeng unfortunately often lost his job and thus could not send remittance home on time. Those became extremely hard times for him as he was in great distress and very weary. He was worrying about his family and the household maintenance while feeling helpless. The exceptional hardship was made even worse due to suspicion from his family when he did not send money home on time. He wrote to the family again and again, trying hard to explain and asking for forgiveness and understanding:

Dear and respected mother, ...It has been more than a month since the last family letter. On the one hand, I was thinking to look for another job in January so I dared not send my earnings in that month. On the other hand, the currency system has been unstable recently in China so the money I earned by hard toil would be exchanged for less than 30~40% of its value; so I do not want to send more. Dear mother, please understand the situation. It is not that I, your son, am conscienceless and do not wish to

send *qiaopi* on time. I will send more money home to support the household maintenance as soon as the currency system becomes stable in China. ...Attached with this letter please receive thirty Hong Kong dollars. [15 March 1950] (Wang 2011: 12)

Dear and respected mother, ...Attached with this letter please receive sixty Hong Kong dollars. Please give five dollars for my elder sister, five dollars for my younger sister, and five dollars for my wife and my son. The remainder will be useful for maintaining the household. After reading your recent letter, I have known all of the situations. Please forgive me that I cannot send lots of money now. I, your son, am still in the dark about my livelihood. I will send more once I have a good opportunity and a large profit. [1 Jun 1950] (ibid.: 14)

Dear and respected mother, ...Attached with this letter please receive forty Hong Kong dollars. Please designate five dollars for brother Jia and the remainder will be useful for maintaining the household. I had been jobless for two months and that is why I have sent fewer *qiaopi* these days. Please forgive me. I am afraid at the moment I cannot send a large amount of money home. [15 May 1951] (ibid.: 24)

Both of the hardship and lack of a promising future made him want to quit and return home. For the first ten years, he tried to give up his life in Thailand and frequently asked his mother's permission to return home. His requests to return home, however, were never approved by her.<sup>39</sup> What made him stay in Thailand—no matter how much he himself wanted to return home—was his concern about domestic finances: he worried that if he resumed the life of a farmer it would be too difficult to provide for the entire family. Six years after his arrival in Thailand, he wrote (Wang 2011: 42):

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<sup>39</sup> For most of the Chaoshan *qiaopi*, the receivers were usually one's parents if both of the father and the mother were alive. In Zeng's case, it was only his mother that he wrote to.

Dear and respected mother: I have already been unemployed for a few months. Sending remittance back home monthly has become very difficult for me. I, your son, do not have any malicious intentions. Please understand my hardship and difficulties in Siam. I intend to return home to the village to farm in the coming year. But I am not sure whether I can make a living for the whole family by farming at home. Could you please reply to this letter with some information about this? [28 December 1953]

From Zeng's *qiaopi*, it is apparent that he feared any disagreement with his mother could be regarded as unfilial conduct. As long as he did not have his mother's permission, the only thing that he could do was to keep asking. His filial duty to his mother placed Zeng in the paradoxical situation of having a home but being unable return to it. Under these circumstances, what home meant to Zeng entailed giving up his individual choice and obeying his mother's decision. Home was thus interpreted as the fulfilment of filial duty to his mother. Reproduced below are several extracts from Zeng's *qiaopi* that express his intention of returning home, both directly and indirectly (ibid.: 1-123):

Dear and respected mother: I would like to return home, will you agree to this? [15 March 1950]

Dear and respected mother: ...I plan to return to the village to farm this year because of the poor living conditions of my sojourn in Siam and the hardship of my labour every day, from early morning to late at night. [11 January 1951]

Dear and respected mother: ...At the moment, I am still in the dark about my livelihood. Thinking about how elderly you are now, mother, if I can find a ship for Shantou, I would really like to leave for home. However, I dare not make such a decision on my own, so I am writing to ask my mother's permission. Please reply with your opinion. [1 December 1951]



Dear and respected mother: ...I, your son, would like to return home if I can find a ship for Shantou. Mother, will you agree to this? [28 May 1952]

Dear and respected mother: ...I am so glad to hear that my family and all of my relatives' lives are getting better in China. There will be ships for Shantou soon. I really hope that I can return home. [9 July 1953]

Dear and respected mother: ...Being away from home for many years, my mind is bent on returning, as I hope I could fly home like an arrow immediately. There are lots of ships heading to Shantou these days... I am anxious to go back home to farm since it seems impossible to have a promising future here in Siam. [2 December 1953]

We do not know exactly why his mother never approved his intention. Most of the time Zeng was obedient to his mother's requests. He did what he could in order to make her happy. His mother, however, seems to have taken him for granted. Even a single disagreement from Zeng was interpreted as defiance by his mother. For example, Zeng believed that it was unwise for his son, who was too young to support even himself, to get married, but Zeng's mother was furious and dismissive of his opinion, and ultimately decided to select a bride for her grandson. The following words are from a letter to Zeng from his mother (ibid.: 121):

My son Zeng: ...You are disobedient to me! You are such an unfilial son! You should be obedient to me; then I would feel happy. I feel angry because everyone around the home village is telling me that it is time for ZS (Zeng's son) to have a wife. I have decided to take a wife for ZS. I hope you send money once you receive this letter. I am very angry because I am being laughed at by villagers. Do send money home once you get the letter then I will not be angry and my health may recover gradually. My son, because I am old now, you should treat me with filial respect, and then I would be glad. [No signature or written date]

In order to be a filial son, Zeng finally sent two thousand Hong Kong dollars home to manage his son's marriage (ibid.: 95):

Dear and respected mother: Attached with the three letters I have sent please receive two thousand Hong Kong dollars in total. Once you receive the remittance, please do only use it for ZS's marriage *pinli* (betrothal money and gifts), buying furniture and repairs to the house. [18 September 1968]

### **Confucian philosophy of *xiao* (filial piety)**

As the only son in the family, Zeng had a filial duty to his parents. In the Chinese patrilineal family system, respect and care for one's parents are two crucial aspects of Confucian philosophy of *xiao*, or 'filial piety'. The Chinese character '孝' (*xiao*) consists of two radicals, an elder (above) and a son (underneath), vividly depicting for the literate an image of an elder being carried by a son. Chapter Ten of *The Classic of Filial Piety* (*Xiao-jing*), which is commonly believed to have been written in about 240 BCE, provides us a normative description of the five acts of filial piety to one's parents:

Confucius (551-479 B.C.) said, 'to be a filial son in serving his parents, he should have utmost reverence for them in everyday domestic life; in nourishing of them, he should endeavour to make them happy; when they are ill, he should take anxious care of them; in mourning over their death, he should show great grief; and when carrying out sacrifices after their death, he should be seriously solemn. Only he can completely fulfil these five acts then he would be regarded as having done his filial duty of serving his parents.' (Hu 2009: 25)

Being away from home, how could a Nanyang migrant carry out filiality to his parents' daily routine, whether by inquiring about their well-being or serving them meals? For Zeng, it was almost impossible to fulfil his duties of reverence for his mother in her everyday domestic life while he was in Thailand. The only way he could show his

reverence for his mother was through his *qiaopi* writing (at a time before telephone was widespread in China). We can find his reverence for his mother in every piece of *qiaopi* he wrote to her, typified by the way he usually began with: ‘Dear and respected mother: Wishing you a life of ease and comfort...’ or ‘Dear and respected mother: Please read this letter as if I were kneeling down in front of you. I would like to report to you respectfully about...’ (Wang 2011: 1-123).

In fact, not just Zeng but most Nanyang migrants showed their filiality through the manner in which they addressed their parents in *qiaopi* writing. Whether it was long or short, a piece of *qiaopi* from a son to his parents was always written in a meek and humble manner. The meek and humble phrasing, combined with the conventional macrostructure of the *qiaopi*, can be considered as a constitutive characteristic of the genre of *qiaopi* writing.

In general, the *qiaopi* genre derives from the classical Chinese correspondence genre in which linguistic norms, grammar, and etiquette were considered very important. There are set phrases and honorific expressions commonly used in *qiaopi* writing to achieve certain rhetorical effects. From the salutation to the closing greetings, the *qiaopi* genre communicates great respect for elders and courtesy to peers. The influence of Confucian thought is reflected in the genre’s stress on precedence and a patriarchal clan system. For instance, in writing a piece of *qiaopi*, the sender would not address his mother if his (paternal) grandmother was still alive; similarly, he would not address his wife if his mother was still alive.

Writing *qiaopi*, as the primary means of communication, enabled ‘meetings’ between Nanyang sojourners abroad and their families at home across space and time. If the genre of *qiaopi* writing is governed by the rules of propriety characteristic of such ‘meetings’, then filial piety is the code of the genre. The use of ‘*kowtow*’ is a classic example. As a former Chinese custom of touching the ground with the forehead, *kowtow* was a special act that showed deep respect and submission. For Nanyang migrants, this cultural custom has been embodied in their *qiaopi* writing, usually phrased as ‘*Kouqing jinan*’ (I *kowtow* to pay respects to you and bless you with golden well-being) and used as a closing greeting.

Similar to the challenges of performing the first act of filial piety, there was almost no

practical way for a Nanyang migrant to conduct the other four acts of filial piety other than through sending *qiaopi* home. *Qiaopi*, as a combination of remittance and family letter, provided a means for Nanyang migrants to support their parents financially; show their anxious concern for their parents' health by directing funds toward medical fees; and express grief for the loss of parents while contributing to the expenses associated with funerals and sacrifices. Often, in order to fulfil these financial obligations, Nanyang migrants would borrow money either from their fellow countrymen or from the *qiaopi* remittance bureaus.

In short, as a son away from home, Zeng was able to fulfil his filial duties to his mother through *qiaopi* letters and associated remittances. To most Nanyang migrants, *qiaopi* became a creative act of filial piety within their migratory practice. In other words, the practice of *qiaopi* writing is a re-interpretation of the social norm, the Confucian philosophy of *xiao*.

## 6. The Notion of Home for Zeng

### Writing *Qiaopi*, (Un)Making Home

*Family can be apart, home relocated, but jia<sup>40</sup> remains intact, as it signifies a system of mutual obligations and a set of cultural values.*

-- Haiming Liu (2005: 1)

#### The making and unmaking of home

Zeng's situation changed over time and his *xiao* to his mother caused her and his wife to gradually ask for more and more money from him. We learn of some of his mother's requirements from Zeng's responses in his *qiaopi*. These ranged from asking for money to buy a toilet to requesting extra money for Zeng's two sisters, regardless of the fact that both of them were married (Wang 2011: 1-123):

Dear and respected mother: ...In your letter, you mentioned that [you wish me] to give some money to my elder sister every month. I am willing, yet unable. I am not heartless. Please forgive me. I will absolutely take care of her livelihood once I can. [18 January 1950]

Dear and respected mother: ...In your letter, you mentioned that I should give my elder sister some help because of financial difficulties. Yes, I should. Unfortunately, I am still a waged worker who earns very little from my hard working. Please give me some time to think of a way to make this possible. [7 April 1954]

Dear and respected mother: ...Regarding the purchase of a toilet you mentioned in your letter, maybe it is wiser to just rent one from neighbours. [22 September 1954]

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<sup>40</sup> In Chinese, family and home are one word, *jia* (家).

Dear and respected mother: ...About sending some money to my younger sister, I will try to manage it as soon as possible. [23 February 1956]

Dear and respected mother: ...About his mother's [Zeng's wife] request to buy coverlets, I am sorry that due to my financial difficulty at the moment, I am afraid I cannot afford it. [7 November 1956]

Most of the time, Zeng found it hard to meet his family's extra requirements. In the replies by Zeng's mother, direct requests of sending money home were fully expressed between the lines (ibid.: 1-123):

My son Zeng: ...It is very important to send more money home every month. [No signature or written date]

My son Zeng: ...Since I joined The People's Commune last year, I have been classified as having overseas Chinese relatives and I need to pay twenty yuan each month for my meal to The People's Commune. So far, I owe the commune eighty yuan. Do send some money home as soon as you receive my letter then the family has food with which to survive. [No signature or written date]

My son Zeng: ...I have received your letter and the six Hong Kong dollars attached... Now we need money to pay for everything because our arable land belongs to the commune [The People's Commune]. In May, I need 150 Hong Kong dollars to buy six hundred catties [500 grams] of rice. Do send more money home as long as you have any, which is the most important thing. [No signature or written date]

My son Zeng: ...I am glad to receive your letter with fifty Hong Kong dollars... My son, you should send money and a letter home every month so that I won't miss you too much. [No signature or written date]



Due to the increasing number of requests, Zeng started to feel disillusioned when he regarded his family. More than that, he received various complaints from his mother, such as one about his ‘unfair’ distribution of remittances among families and relatives (ibid.: 30):

Dear and respected mother: ...Regarding the allocation of the *yaojin* [money as a gift for New Year] at the end of last year, I did not mean to favour one and discriminate against the other. I blame myself that I am not able to earn enough to give everyone a lot [of money]. [19 February 1952]

What makes this kind of complaint about remittance distribution significant is that it exemplifies a common phenomenon among *qiaopi* documents: since *qiaopi* remittances became a new form of household income, many families with Nanyang connections became more and more reliant on these payments for their maintenance. In his book *Emigrant Communities in South China: A Study of Overseas Migration and its Influence on Standards of Living and Social Change* (1939), sociologist Chen Da showed that families in Zhanglin village in Chaoshan with Nanyang connections relied heavily on their relatives overseas: *qiaopi* remittances constituted between seventy-five and eighty per cent of their household income (Chen 1939: 83, 115). *Qiaopi* often document the family battles that arose from quarrels among family members for larger shares of the remittances. If we agree that sending *qiaopi* (attached with remittance) home is a way for the Nanyang migrants to make home from afar, then the complaints of the remittance receivers (i.e., their domiciled families) can be understood as a process of un-making home, as their ideas of home may have to be constructed and reconstructed over and over.

In Zeng’s case, the *construction* and *reconstruction* of his ideas of home also resulted from the lack of care and concern which his family showed him. Zeng’s family always ignored even the smallest request he made to them, such as sending family photos to him. As he wrote (Wang 2011: 80):

Dear and respected mother: ...Why is it that I have been asking for a family photo for almost a year but still have not received it? Do you think

that this is an unimportant matter? [4 December 1957]

### **The ‘dual family system’**

Zeng’s disappointment with his family gradually grew, leading him to take a second wife in Thailand after he had been living there for over fifteen years. Without a divorce from his first wife in China, he then needed to fulfil his duties towards both homes. This is a very common phenomenon in the history of Nanyang migration, which Chen Da called the ‘dual family system’ (Chen 1939). During their Nanyang career, many migrants acquired a non-Chinese wife or concubine, forming a second family abroad.

Each *dual family* implies the *dual self* of the migrant. Zeng settled into a life in which he had a home *here* in Thailand and a home *there* in China. He had sentimental attachments *here* in Thailand, along with a new life and hopes for the future. He simultaneously had sentimental attachment *there* in China, the country of his birth to which he despaired of ever returning. Seen in this light, he was internally divided. He managed and manifested this multiplicity by writing and sending *qiaopi*. Since a piece of *qiaopi* is a letter attached with remittance, Zeng could express his sentiments through individual written messages, while also attaching remittances as part of his duty, putting both in an envelope, sealing it up and sending it out. These documents serve as the physical proof for Zeng himself that he is performing his duty and expressing his love. And yet it is also a metaphorical means for separating one part of himself (the part with sentiments for his Chinese family) from another (the part with sentiments for his Thai family). At the moment a *qiaopi* was dispatched, one part of himself would sail away to China while the other part would be temporarily freed to fulfil its obligations in Thailand. Under the dual family system, he led multiple lives. *Qiaopi* were the means for him to make the separation between one life and another clear. Therefore, *qiaopi* serve as crucial forms of self-expression as well as of life narrative.

Eventually, Zeng fell into despair, after having reunited with his Chinese family during his first and last trip home in 1973. His disappointment was fully expressed in the last *qiaopi* he sent to his first wife and son in 1974 (five years after his mother passed away), written after he returned to Thailand and finally cast off his idea of retiring and returning to his place of origin (Wang 2011: 112, 113):

To my wife and my son: Due to the amount of gold ornament I brought back home last year, you thought that I had lots of savings in Siam. In haste, you have started building a new floor [on our home]! ... You are all wrong, however! Within a year [last year], I, as a wage earner, had used up all that I had saved over more than twenty years. Now I am over fifty. I even worry about myself. My income is inadequate to meet my expenses. How can I have money for you to build a new floor? Please don't kid yourself.

In addition, the last time when my boss returned to China, is it true that the whole family, including the kids, visited him with the intention of begging for more gold ornaments and money? ... You are all shameless! I felt so ashamed of you when my boss mentioned to me about 'your whole family's begging visit'. The stuff I had already brought home last year was rather considerable. You are so greedy! Now I am old, I can only be thick-skinned and work in Cousin Waisha's shop, though he [Cousin Waisha, Zeng's boss] does not have a favourable opinion of me... [12 July 1974]

I do not want to express any judgement here over whether Zeng's wife and son were greedy, as I cannot go back to investigate the situation in which his wife and his son were living. What interests me is how Zeng's attitudes towards them changed. In the circumstance of his Chinese wife bringing the whole family to beg for money from his boss, Zeng finally lost his temper, both with her and his son. This last *qiaopi* shows us the end of a relationship and the end of an effort to continue making a home, a home that eventually left him disconcerted and to which he did not wish to return.

### **The notion of home for Zeng**

All through Zeng's life abroad, the idea of home was never simple for him. In his twenties, it was home that he needed to be away from, in terms of his family role and responsibility: as the only male adult in a family in Chaoshan, he needed to make a living for the whole family. Hence, home became the reason why he had to leave. After several

years of suffering from the sojourning life in Thailand, he hoped to return home, but he could not do so because of his filial duty to his mother. Then, with over twenty years of hardship overseas, having made every endeavour to fulfil his family obligations while receiving little affection in return, Zeng ultimately became despondent about returning home. Home, then, became a source of emotional distress. Having set up a second home in Thailand, he laboured to accommodate his dual self under the exigencies of his dual family. The multiple homes became a manifestation of his internal multiplicity. In the end, he gave up his Chinese family as a way of making sense of his self and his world in his new life in Thailand. Home finally became the context for making sense of his position in the world.

As Michael Jackson points out, ‘home is always lived as a relationship, a tension.... Home, like any word we use to cover a particular field of experience, always begets its own negation’ (1995: 122). Sometimes it lies between one’s point of origin and one’s destination. Sometimes it is between where one finds oneself and where one loses or gives up on that self. And, sometimes, it is between where one attains freedom and where one is bonded to social obligations. In spite of the very different meanings that Zeng ascribes to home in different contexts, there was always ‘a relationship’ or ‘a tension’ that marked Zeng’s expressions of his experience of home-away-from-home.

From Zeng’s *qiaopi*, we gain glimpses into the tensions inherent in the changing relationships between Zeng and his family, as well as into the way his ideas of home were shaped by those tensions. Zeng’s ideas of home were constantly constructed and reconstructed through his communication with his Chinese family by *qiaopi*. Thus, writing *qiaopi* became a process through which a Chinese Nanyang migrant, like Zeng, made sense of home, by articulating his lived experience as a sojourner into language.

### **Writing *qiaopi* and making home**

If *qiaopi* express different ideas of home among the Chinese Nanyang migrants, the process of *producing* them, the act of writing, as a form of engagement or a kind of experience, could be interpreted as a process of making that very home. In a world of movement, ‘home as something to accompany people whenever they decamp, ...comes to be located in a routine set of practices, in a repetition of habitual social interactions’

(Rapport and Overing 2007:176). Each time a Nanyang migrant, like Zeng, nibbed his pen, spread out a blank letter paper and started with ‘Dear and respected parents’, he might already be at home in his memories of what home meant to him. It could be the smile of his mother, a giggle from his baby son, a tear on the face of his wife on their farewell, or the courtyard in his house in which he had spent all his childhood playing. When he was writing a piece of *qiaopi* to particular people, he imagined home, making a journey to those people. He read through it when he completed a paragraph, imagining his family reading his letter when it arrived. He then finished it, the piece of paper no longer blank but instead representing his enduring efforts, his love for his family, his hopes for the future. The piece of *qiaopi* was somehow sentimentally attached to home.

In addition, as a special kind of family letter, *qiaopi* also include specific messages about remittances: their amount, usage, and distribution. *Qiaopi* combines the function of serving both as a practical means for making home for one’s family by providing their living and as a form of intimate communication. The migrants, as the *qiaopi* writers, were responsible for allocating the money between family members, relatives, and household maintenance funds. In material terms, sending remittance back home is a way of making home by financing the domestic consumption connected to raising a household. Some Nanyang migrants gave their parents the greater portion of remittance with very little for their wives and children, and, more rarely, for relatives and clan families. Some allocated relatively equal between their parents, wives, children, and kin. Some even sent remittances to their home village for building clan halls, schools, and hospitals. The detailed distribution of remittance throughout families, clans, or even the wider homeland may be understood as an expression of migrants’ idealisation of home. It may also express the balance between the migrants’ concern for their original family in China and their second families in Nanyang under the dual family system. Conceptually, making decisions about how much money would be sent, how to use it, and how to distribute the money, is the very process of ‘the orderly use of symbolic form’—in the form of money (which carries meaning for the money senders and receivers)—‘for the making of orderly worlds’ of home (Rapport and Overing 2007: 442). From this perspective, for a Nanyang migrant, home could be a world he made by his arrangement of remittance payments, inscribed on the surface of his relationships with different receivers, through which he

made sense of his world. Thus, decisions regarding the distribution of remittance made by the Nanyang migrants in their *qiaopi* writing express their ideas of home and can be considered as acts of making home. However, as we have discussed, sending *qiaopi* remittances home could also be a process of unmaking home, insofar as they might also elicit complaints about and blame for unfair distribution of funds, thus leading to family quarrels.

In short, for the Chinese Nanyang migrants, both the writing of family letters and sending of remittances serve as narrations of home in a world of movement, becoming ways of making (and unmaking) home away from home. *Qiaopi* were exactly the means by which Nanyang migrants made home on their journey away from home, through which they expressed and fulfilled themselves while making sense of the world.



## 7. Imagination in *Qiaopi* Writing

### At Home in the World

For migrants, a family letter may define an absence: of home, of family, of love. It is written to an absence. It may also serve as a way of transporting a migrant home, imaginarily. Each time a migrant writes a letter home, they are making a journey to their family: scenarios with family are developed in their imagination, and thus relationships are crafted, and home is constituted. In this section, I will discuss how individual migrants authored their life through *qiaopi* correspondence and how the *living process* of writing *qiaopi* inscribed their authors' individual consciousness.

#### **Beyond *qiaopi* genre: Imagination in *qiaopi* writing**

Each time Zeng spread out a blank piece of paper and nibbed his pen, even if his day had been stressful at work, the setting immediately created a break that allowed him to enter a different mode from that of the miserable reality. Momentarily, he might step out of his regular life sojourning: in his mind he might have already made a journey to his family. Thus, the very process of writing a *qiaopi* became the movement of the migrant's imagination and a way to trace of his or her feelings. I will try to elaborate this point with the following example.

'Dear and respected mother...' (Wang 2011: 75)—let us take one piece of *qiaopi* that Zeng wrote to his mother—Zeng wrote. While the pen traced his thoughts about his mother, he was perhaps shaping the mental image of his mother that he normally conjured when he finished writing this salutation.

He continued, 'I was extremely worried to know that you were unwell, having chest pains and could not sleep well at night...Please do go and see a doctor' (ibid.). On that specific occasion, he might have had a tendency to ascribe a new feeling about his sick mother to the mental image he usually had when she was physically well. That is, the normal mental image of his mother immediately took on a new quality based on his intention towards it at that moment—his sentimental attachment to his sick mother and his wish that his mother would get well soon. While his imagination went on and the

scenarios about his mother developed, the mental image of his mother also became alive: he might see his mother lying on a bed suffering pain; he might hear her coughing badly; and he might even feel the chest pains that his mother had when coughing.

He therefore tried hard to think about how she could relieve the pain even for a little bit, and he wrote: ‘Dear mother, you could please apply a few drops of the White Flower Embrocation that I sent home last time to your chest where you feel pain. Or please take it orally with cooled boiled water. Please be sure not to use too many drops’ (ibid.). He might then suspend his pen, stop writing for a while and imagine that he was carefully preparing the medicine for his mother by counting the drops ‘one, two, three’, and then offering it to her, hoping that she feels better afterwards.

He then completed the piece of *qiaopi* with the closing greeting—‘I kowtow (touch the ground with the forehead) to pay respect to you and bless you with golden well-being’ (ibid.). He carefully sealed the *qiaopi* envelope. On the way to post it, he might have held it cautiously as if he were holding his wish, as if he saw his mother reading his *qiaopi* when it arrived with smile on her face, and using the remittance that was attached as medical fees, consulting the local village doctor, having some herbal medicine, and so on and so forth.

Through the imaginary process, the situational affective sense of his mother (she was unwell in this case) became obvious. It was the feeling of being in his mother’s presence that counted. While thinking of his mother, the mental image of his mother lost its own sense and took on the sense of his mother—the subject that the mental image represents. In other words, at some level, the mental image of his mother ceased being merely an image appearing in Zeng’s mind and instead stood in for his absent mother. It is from this point of view that, I argue, the imagination in *qiaopi* writing enabled a ‘meeting’ between Zeng and his mother across space and time. Through his imagination, his *absent* mother became *present*. For a brief moment, he was living in an as-if world: being together with his mother.

### **Being free in an as-if world**

How is it essentially different being in an as-if world from being in reality? And what is the connection between the two? As I have argued, writing the expressive part (that

beyond genre) of a piece of *qiaopi* served as an outlet for the *qiaopi* author's imagination, one that accommodated the creation of an 'as-if' world. I contend that the expressive elements of a piece of *qiaopi* were not merely documentary; they can be understood as conforming to what John Langshaw Austin (1962) called 'illocutionary acts' or 'performative utterances' whose expression entails 'the performing of an action' (ibid.: 6-7). The expressive elements of a piece of *qiaopi* are constituted, at least in part, if not entirely, through the actual performance of acts that have the potential to alter the current reality and thereby instantiate a contingent as-if world.

Let me continue with the same example to elaborate this point. In reality, Zeng struggled in his sojourning life in Thailand, and he suffered even more because he could not be with his beloved mother at the specific time when she was unwell. In the as-if world, it became possible for him to play his role as a filial son: for example in showing his concern for his mother's health, and in carefully preparing medicine and offering it to her. Nevertheless, the as-if world was not necessarily fictional insofar as it did not merely exist in Zeng's imagination. Instead, it had, to use Austin's (ibid.) terminology, perlocutionary force and effect (contingent consequence) in reality. Being in the as-if world, however briefly, created a short-lived alternate reality that returned Zeng to his regular life, slightly altered. At the moment the piece of *qiaopi* was posted, he might sense great relief and feel good in himself. His life would move on as his energy was built up. Again and again, those moments of being in an as-if world that Zeng had each time he wrote a piece of *qiaopi*, became moments of connection throughout his sojourning trajectory over the 26 years. For Zeng, those moments might have been crucial as they linked him to his beloved ones and gave his life meaning.

Here, the as-if world did not come out of nothing but from the concrete situation in which, as in the example above, Zeng became upset about his absence when his beloved mother was unwell. And Zeng's intention in dealing with the situation was embedded in the process of creating the particular as-if world. In other words, it is his intentionality in a specific situation that motivates or stimulates an imagination, and directs the developing of scenarios. As a break from his normal way of being, for a short time, the as-if world allowed him to become a person whom he wished to be and to be where he

wished to be. That is, he was temporarily free, not just hopelessly mired in his mislabelled sojourning world.

On the relation between imagination and freedom, Rapport and Harris explain Jean-Paul Sartre's point in *Reflections on Imagination: Human Capacity and Ethnographic Method*:

The defining feature of the imagination, asserts Sartre (1963 [1948]), lies in the ability of the human mind to imagine what is not the case. Key to the phenomenon of the imagination is the mind (and a wide bodily awareness) detaching itself from its immediate environs. We can distance ourselves from an immediate experience and so gain a distinct perspective on it. This is our freedom, Sartre goes on to assert, and the proof of our not being programmed to react to stimuli or otherwise determined. (Rapport and Harris, 2015: 5)

For Zeng, his momentary freedom came from his consciousness's momentary detachment from its immediate environs—probably, after a whole day's toil that left him with an exhausted body, he might have semi-reclined on his bunk bed, writing the letter in dim-light and feeling homesick. Simultaneously, in his mind, he placed himself in the as-if world: being at home with his mother.

### **At home in the world in *qiaopi* writing**

While imagining home in his *qiaopi* writing, therefore, Zeng would tend to single out an experience of home, which he could handle, and with which he could be comfortable and fulfilled, or in Sartre's words, one in which he could 'take possession of it':

The act of imagination...is an incantation destined to make the object of one's thought, the thing one desires, appear in such a way that one can take possession of it. There is always, in that act, something of the imperious and the infantile, a refusal to take account of distance and difficulties. (Sartre 2004 [1940]: 125)

Whenever he wanted to return home but was unable to do so, he made a virtual return each time he wrote a piece of *qiaopi* home. Writing *qiaopi* served as a way of transporting him to home imaginarily, as ‘a refusal to take account of distance and difficulties’. Each time he wrote a piece of *qiaopi* to his family, he was able to make a journey home through his imagination.

For the first ten years of sojourning, Zeng wished to return home, either to resume the life as a farmer at home or even just to visit home; but he could not do so due to his great concern for his family. On the one hand, he suffered his internal feeling of failure and shame. On the other hand, he somehow managed to live a life with the suffering through writing *qiaopi* home. What exists beneath his attachment to home and his years of toil in Thailand, it becomes apparent, is him constantly fighting and negotiating with his various kinds of struggle—between at-home and away-from-home, between his dual family and his dual self, between his social obligation of being a son, a father, a husband, a brother, a son-in-law or a *fanke* (foreign guest) and his self-fulfilment, between his past and his future. Victor Turner (1967: 93) explores these kinds of ‘betwixt and between’ or ‘liminal’ periods in rites of passage as an ‘interstructural situation’ and discusses the ‘nature of “interstructural” human beings’. As Thomassen elaborates,

Turner realized that ‘liminality’ served not only to identify the importance of in-between periods, but also to understand the human reactions to liminal experiences: the way in which personality was shaped by liminality, the sudden foregrounding of agency, and the sometimes dramatic tying together of thought and experience. (Thomassen 2009: 14)

Within the liminal period represented through the writing of *qiaopi*, Zeng’s understanding of home and his experience of home were betwixt and between; that is to say, they are the ‘tying together of thought and experience’. The liminality affords a space for him to negotiate his identity between two seeming disjointed worlds. To apply Homi Bhabha’s (1994) phrasing, such a space is called the ‘third space’, referring to a state of hybridity. This in-between space provides ‘the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood’ (Bhabha 1994: 2). Through his *qiaopi*, one is able to see that Zeng’s whole

migrant life becomes a constant effort to work things out in a way he could live with. While writing *qiaopi*, Zeng was consciously exploring how he wished to live and balance his obligations to different people. Either by making a virtual return or by imagining sailing one part of himself away (while leaving the other part), here were ways in which Zeng managed to live a life with hope, love, duties, dilemmas, distance, separation, difficulties, frustration and tribulations. *Qiaopi* correspondence became a way for Zeng to author his life, which was simultaneously virtual and actual, imaginary and real. Each time he wrote a piece of *qiaopi*, he momentarily created an alternate reality for himself: he was neither at home nor sojourning, but somewhere in-between.

Let me be clear. When Zeng was writing a piece of *qiaopi*, he did not confuse the salutation with the person to whom it was addressed, i.e. his mother. He knew that she was far away at home in China and he was sojourning in Thailand. But at the same time, his mother was imagined when the salutation was inscribed on a piece of paper, and he met his mother in his imagination. Immediately, the ‘meeting’ with his mother at that moment in his imagination became an alternative reality for him. The moment for him was simultaneously imaginary and real: he was neither exactly at-home nor purely sojourning, but somewhere in-between. The in-betweenness afforded a space for him, as a migrant, to negotiate with himself regarding the dilemma between the distance and his love for his mother. It was an oxymoronic way of being separate from a family that he loved in order to demonstrate that love. And the in-betweenness is exactly where his consciousness accommodates such an oxymoronic human condition for him, as a migrant, to be ‘at home in the world’, neither here nor there (Jackson 1995).

It is, I argue, a space for cosmopolitan imagination. On the one hand, it is the creation of the space, the act of imagining oneself neither at home nor away, but ‘in the world’ that is cosmopolitan. One creates the space, and in turn, the space opens a door for one to be free from one’s social, cultural or historical boundaries and to be anywhere in the world. That is to say, on the other hand, the space is cosmopolitan.

Let us once again briefly review the process of writing *qiaopi* that inscribed the self-consciousness of the Chinese diasporas (such as Zeng) and their movement, as the act of cosmopolitan imagination, and also as the process of creating a cosmopolitan space. To write a piece of *qiaopi*, one starts from genre-type greetings. Although these conventional



epistolary expressions may not capture the essence and extent of the *qiaopi* author's (a migrant's) experience, they provide a stage for both parties (the *qiaopi* writer and its readers) to act on. A *supposed-to-have* relationship within the conventional allows both parties to start performing a social interaction across space and time. As one continues to write, addressing particular concerns, tackling specific difficulties, or sharing exciting news, one's imagination unfolds, and scenarios thus develop in one's mind, purposively. Momentarily, one places oneself in an as-if world that is built with self-awareness. In the as-if world, one becomes free from one's self-boundaries and thus it becomes possible to open oneself to self-negotiate in the way in which one wishes with oneself and others.

### **The end**

After leaving his homeland for 26 years and writing hundreds of pieces of *qiaopi*, Zeng eventually made his first trip home in 1973. However, he fell into despair after having been reunited with his Chinese family. His disappointment was fully expressed in the last piece of *qiaopi* he sent to his wife and son in China. He, in the end, gave up his Chinese family as a way of making sense of his self and his world in his new life in Thailand. No more *qiaopi* were sent by Zeng. It is the end of Zeng's imagination of his Chinese home; and thus the end of my imagination of Zeng's interior world and the end of this chapter.

# Chapter Three

## Home and Homeawayness

### *Stay in an Old Courtyard-house*



*Everybody needs a home, as at least you have someplace to leave which is where most folks will say you must be coming from.*

**-- June Jordan (1985, cited in Rutherford 1990: 14)**

In contemporary China, most rural migrants to urban centres return home only once a year, usually during the Chinese New Year (Chan, 2010; Pun and Lu, 2010; Huang, 2011). According to the National Bureau of Statistics of China (NBSC), by the end of 2011 the population of rural-urban migrants had reached 158.63 million (NBSC 2012). This enormous army of migrants, constituting the main part of the travel rush population, has over the past two decades transformed the *chunyun* (Spring Festival travel rush) in China into an annual spectacle. The *chunyun*, which takes place in January or February

each year, includes the movement of *fanxiang* (returning to rural home) before Chinese New Year and that of *fancheng* (returning to cities) after Chinese New Year.

Thus, the migrants spend most of the year away from home. To some degree, their being *at-home* becomes an annual holiday while being *away-from-home* comes to represent their everyday life. How does this affect their feelings concerning home and their ways of making home? Between *leaving* and *returning* home, how do the migrants possess (or how are they possessed by) their sense of being-in-the-world?

In this chapter, I mainly present two specific moments: one when a migrant (Yang Cui) discarded a plastic bag in an old courtyard of a house, and a second, when another migrant (Xiao Bin) was packing to return home. These moments, I shall argue, capture something significant of the home-making practices, both behavioural and ideational, that migrants undertake in their migratory experience. In addition, this chapter attempts to explore, first, individual migrants' perceptions of space, as *home*, *non-home*, or *the outside world*; second, their sense of being-in-the-world, i.e., homeawayness; and third, their ways of making home through building life-projects. I argue that for migrants, the movements between *at-home* and *away-from-home* may be best imagined as neither circular nor linear but instead as an onward spiral. The chapter ends with an exploration of how one makes home through building a life-project along the spiral curve and how one's sense of homeawayness relates to home-making in this spiralling trajectory.

As we have learned from the first chapter, Bomaqiao faces its ongoing dramatic transformation: from agriculture-dominated to manufacturing-oriented, its disappearing street cries and the emerging factory noises, the striking contrast of the locals' and the migrants' foodscapes and the village's strong links both with the outward migration in the past and with the inward rural-urban migration in the present. When it comes to dwelling places, the village is separated into three different parts: *Xin cuo qu*—a new residential district with matchbox-like houses (a local name for a house that is built on a small piece of land with several floors and without any outward design), *po cuo dao*—an old dwelling district with courtyard-houses, and *cang ion dang*—a factory-field district. The new dwelling district and factory-field district were built during the last decade on land that was previously used for farming. The district of old houses was, until then, the only dwelling area. Now, all of these three parts have become residential districts. Most

of the villagers are now living in the new district. Some villagers who run factories may have their homes in their factories, on a separate floor. The migrant factory workers mainly live in the old courtyard district, where the houses are in a state of near-collapse and are cheap to rent. Besides the migrants, some old villagers (for example, some parents of factory owners) also live in the old courtyard-houses. They are reluctant to move to the new dwelling district or to factories and prefer to stay in their ramshackle courtyard-houses which hold their life-long memories.

Through following Yang Cui (whom I met on the first day of my arrival), I made several visits to Shunxin Toy Factory where she worked, in Bomaqiao. Yang Cui soon became my friend and one of my key informants. She then showed me the place where she lived: a room in the old courtyard-house owned by Shunxin, the factory owner, and his mother Grandma Chang.

## 8. The Old Courtyard-house

### *The Final Breath to Accommodate Memory and Hope*

*Architectural space, because it can seem to mirror rhythms of human feeling, has been called 'frozen music'—spatialized time.*

— Yifu Tuan (1977: 118)

It is early January 2012, and the first time I ‘meet’ the old courtyard-house. When I approach the house, stepping in and wandering around it, I find myself deeply attracted by its details, and am filled with nostalgic feelings as well as confusion.

Right after turning from a narrow alleyway, Yang Cui points to an old gateway. ‘Here it is. Come in!’ It is a stone arched gateway with fine carvings on it, though very old. Together with the *duilian* (Chinese antithetical couplets usually including two phrases written as calligraphy on vertical red banners) placed on either side of the door, the gateway offers a special, almost festive, welcome, as though it is visually preparing for visitors to the house. The shiny couplets remind me that the Chinese New Year is coming. I wonder, what kind of migrants post couplets on houses they rent? To my knowledge, most migrant workers in Bomaqiao spend little money decorating the places in which they live. As soon as I step into the house and meet Grandma Chang, I find the answer: it is Grandma Chang, a Bomaqiao local, and not the migrants living here, who posted the *duilian*.

Grandma Chang is a local Bomaqiao villager who has been living in this house for more than half a century, since her marriage in the 1950s. She leads a life full of memories in this house and she told me that she was reluctant to move to her son’s new house and preferred to stay in this old courtyard-house.<sup>41</sup> Knowing that I am a research student interested in migration, including the historical Nanyang migration, Grandma Chang gets so excited that her eyes begin to fill with tears. She takes my hand and shows me around the house. Suddenly, Yang Cui is not my tour guide any more. Yang Cui abandons showing me the house and goes to cook dinner.

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<sup>41</sup> After I moved into Grandma Chang’s courtyard-house, I met many other village elders living in the old dwelling district, who were also reluctant to move to the new dwelling district.

The architectural style of the house is a mixture of a traditional Chaoshan *si dian jin* (four points of gold) layout and lots of Western-style decoration. *Si dian jin* is representative of the Chaoshan architecture styles<sup>42</sup>, commonly found in rural Chaoshan. Just as the name suggests, four rooms take up the four corners of the courtyard. Besides the four rooms, there are usually two other chamberlets, one on either side of the entrance hall. As the central point of the house, the courtyard connects the entrance hall and the back hall. In between the courtyard and the entrance hall there is usually a patio. However, the patio in this house has been transformed into a Western style veranda, which links to a staircase leading to the first floor. Dressed with two tasteful classical columns, the veranda delivers a strong foreign flavour within this traditional Chinese courtyard-house. Additionally, the building materials also exude this foreign flavour: *ang mo hue*<sup>43</sup> (a local name for Western cement) and smaragdine *xi yang zhuan* (Western ceramic tiles). The smaragdine tiles look so bright against the crumbling old walls. Grandma Chang then tells me that every single piece of these green tiles was imported and brought from Nanyang by her father-in-law, who built this house in the 1920s, even though he spent most of his life in Thailand as a Nanyang migrant. When she mentions this, it reminds me immediately of Zeng and of the many similar stories that I have learnt from *qiaopi*—migrants who spent most of their lives in Nanyang as sojourners while making great efforts to build mansion houses in their hometown in China.

It is these delicate architectural details that fill the space with an ambience of almost perfect mixtures of the Oriental and the Occidental, the local tradition and the foreign fashion. Evoking a special human feeling, such an ambience flows, similarly to what the geographer Yifu Tuan (1977: 118) calls ‘frozen music’, an idea that architectural space ‘can seem to mirror rhythms of human feeling’. However, the ‘frozen music’ is drowned by the piles of litter in the courtyard and the half-finished plastic products piled up in the halls and rooms, as soon as I move my eyes away from these delicate details to the general view of the house.

Passing through the veranda I see an entrance hall in the middle and two chamberlets,

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<sup>42</sup> Besides *si dian jin*, the other two Chaoshan characteristic planning architecture layouts are *xia shan hu* (downhill tiger) and *si ma tuo che* (four-horse driven wagon).

<sup>43</sup> Literally, *ang mo* means blond hair and *hue* means cement. Since Shantou was opened as a port city to the outside world in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there have been many Westerners in Shantou. Chaoshan local people used *ang mo* (blond hair) to refer to Westerners and also as a prefix for objects from the Western world.



which are all filled to the brim with pieces of half-finished plastic toy products. During my tour, I find that lots of space in this house is now used for storing plastic products, including half of the back hall (the other part of the back hall is left for their ancestor worship), and even the pigpen attached to the house. A pigpen filled with plastic products rather than pigs? My mind finds itself especially stuck on that...

Many thoughts about links between these households with pigpens within their houses and the Chinese ideogram for house, home, residence, or family, 家 (jiā), soon flash through my mind. The Chinese character ‘家’ is a combination of the radical<sup>44</sup> ‘宀’ (a roof of a house) and the radical ‘豕’ (a pig), which is, a pig under a roof. The following section shows a few milestones in the evolution of the Chinese symbol for the character ‘home’ (家):



Shang Dynasty (1600 B.C. to 1046 B.C.) in *Jia gu wen* (Oracle bone script)



West Zhou Dynasty (1046 B.C. to 771 B.C.) in *Jin wen* (Bronze script)



Qin Dynasty (221 B.C. to 206 B.C.) in *Zhuan wen* (Seal script)



The current character in *Kai shu* (Regular script)

So, the Chinese character ‘home’ shows a roof (of a house) with a pig beneath it. But how did ‘a roof with a pig beneath it’ come to signify home in China? Let us turn briefly to history for an explanation. Pig domestication represents a particularly important transition from the fishing and hunting age to the agricultural period. The history of

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<sup>44</sup> A Chinese radical is a graphical component of a Chinese character, which is often semantic but may sometimes be a phonetic or artificially extracted portion of the character.

raising pigs in southern China can be traced back to 10,000 years ago (Schneider 2011). Pigs, as an integral part of home, provided the first metaphor for security of meat supply and the prosperity of a home. From this point of view, it was the pig that enabled a home to be anchored firmly in a place. For millennia in China, according to Schneider, virtually every rural household in China raised at least one or two pigs each year. Therefore, ‘a roof with a pig beneath it’ was exactly the way of life for most Chinese households: having a shelter and raising pigs (or some other livestock).

However, this household pig-raising, which lasted thousands years, has gradually disappeared since the 1980s, when industrial forms began to emerge, especially in cities like Shantou, which is a ‘special economic zone’. The world changes, as does the relationship between human beings and livestock within the Chinese concept of home, together with the usage of space. We can clearly see this in this courtyard-house, which is flooded with industrial products, including in the pigpen.

Wandering around the house, I become deeply fascinated with what the house is telling me, from its architecture, its delicate decorations, and what is now fully filled with half-finished industrial products and piles of rubbish. As on a face of a centenarian, age has left its traces on the walls of the house. Drowned in a flood of urbanisation and industrialisation, this courtyard-house is struggling with its final breath to contribute to the accommodation of the rural-urban migration flow, as well as to accommodate the migrants’ hope for making a better life in the future.

### **A moment of reunion frozen in a family photograph**

Besides the plastic products, the industrialisation in Bomaqiao also brings the factory workers, who migrate thousands of miles from other provinces, to the courtyard-houses in the old dwelling district. Grandma Chang has told me that in total there are six migrant workers now living in this house, including Yang Cui.

‘Yang Cui and her man [Lao Bo] stay in this room; Bin [Xiao Bin] stays in the next one and three new girls just moved into that room last week...’ Grandma Chang shows me. ‘This is my room, come in!’

It is a bedroom filled to the brim with old-fashioned furniture. A Chinese hand carved four-poster wooden bed is covered by mosquito netting with traditional *Chao*

embroidery<sup>45</sup>, and there is a slim wooden washstand next to the bed. What catches my eye is the gallery wall next to the washstand. I move closely to look at it. It displays family photos, most of which are black-and-white. At this moment, I feel that I have moved back in time, not just because of the old-fashioned objects but because of the ambience that is fully loaded with lingering family memories.

‘This one is my husband and this is ... Look at this one! It is our whole family photo from when my husband returned home for the last time from Thailand, almost thirty years ago,’ she says.

‘Oh, isn’t it the courtyard of this house?’ I ask.

By recognising the distinct archway and pillars, I am surprised to realise that the family photo was taken in the courtyard of this house. A spring of nostalgic feeling wells up inside me suddenly while looking at a huge family gathering in such a blossoming and luxuriantly green courtyard; the courtyard in the past. Albeit it is a black-and-white photograph, it seems very colourful to me.

Right now I am moving my eyes from the courtyard in the past (the one in the photo) to the courtyard in the present (the one outside Grandma Chang’s room). Ironically, I see a rather grey and gloomy image: a tidy and elegant garden courtyard has disappeared under piles of rubbish and filth and it is starting to smell bad without any proper green plants. The nostalgic feeling instantaneously shifts to a complex and ambivalent feeling, which then haunts me throughout the rest of the tour of the house. I become especially sensitive to words regarding the courtyard uttered by Grandma Chang:

*Yes, it was the yard outside. We used to have clan family gatherings in this yard, whenever our xianluo fanke<sup>46</sup> [migrants to Thailand] returned home, or on occasions such as Chinese New Year, Qingming Festival [Tomb-sweeping Day], or wedding banquets of any clan relatives. It [the yard] could hold more than ten dining tables... Now the yard is empty. There are*

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<sup>45</sup> *Chao* embroidery, also called Chaozhou embroidery is a type of *Yue* embroidery from Guangdong province, which is one of the four major types of embroidery in China. The other three are *Su* embroidery from Jiangsu province, *Xiang* embroidery from Hunan province and *Shu* embroidery from Sichuan province.

<sup>46</sup> *Xianluo* is the former name of Thailand (Siam) in Chinese and *fanke* is a common name for Chinese living overseas in Chaoshan dialect.

*no family gatherings of those kinds anymore... the young move to the outside world... Then after the young move out and these ghuasengian<sup>47</sup> [migrants from other provinces] move in, here is not our family yard anymore but a public garbage dump... It was our yard but now it is their dump...*

I fix my eyes on Grandma Chang when I am listening to her talking for a while, and her expressive face changes considerably. She is smiling and excited when she shares with me the memories of the big family gatherings in the past in this courtyard and falls into those beautiful (for her, at least) reveries. Then her face becomes mournful and depressed when she starts telling me about the decline of the courtyard.

There is a deep-seated clan stereotype; for most Chaoshan elders, a whole family means the clan family. And such a stereotype can find its expression in their residential houses, at least those with a courtyard. Many families, especially the rich ones, regard it as an honour to have a magnificent courtyard-house, where the whole family can live together and hold important family meetings. To Grandma Chang, the courtyard carries the family's memories of, and the metaphor for, life: to be united and gather together as a whole family.

'It was the last time my husband returned home.' Grandma Chang then emphasises it, although in a very low voice. She tells me that within the forty-five years he was away from home (from 1954 to 1999), her husband only came home three times in total. The photo was taken during their last reunion in 1984.

In the later days that I spent in the courtyard, I gradually came to know that Grandma Chang was one of the many 'left-behind' wives of the migrants, who are called '*fanke shen*' by the other villagers. As with Zeng, her husband had built a second family in Thailand, which was a common phenomenon of Nanyang migration as we have heard—the so-called 'dual family system' (Chen 1939).

I then turn to Grandma Chang while nodding my head slightly to show my understanding of her complex feelings. What the photo means to her is not just an image

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<sup>47</sup> This is a local insulting term. It refers to migrant workers from other provinces, and is commonly known in the Chaoshan region.

but also an image of feeling. Such an image of feeling brings her back to the moment of her last family reunion, in particular with her husband. For each time Grandma Chang looks at the photo, she refreshes her memory of the reunion once more, and starts unfolding her memory from that moment.

The moment of the reunion has been frozen in the form of a photograph. As a means of creating memories, photography first records a key moment of a Nanyang migrant's home trip—a moment when the whole family gather together in the courtyard with the *fanke* (the Nanyang migrant: Grandma Chang's husband) sitting in the middle, and then the record of that moment becomes the memory of the whole event—the last home trip.

Such a moment of reunion that has been inscribed on a photo should be of great significance to Grandma Chang (as a *fanke shen*) as well as to her husband who is a sojourner. How important is a reunion to migrants and how could it affect their ideas of home? If we consider that *being-away-from-home* is itself a way of making home for the Nanyang migrants, then the moment of reunion on a home trip would be the climax in the process of home making. Or in another case, like a disappointing home trip (such as Zeng's case), would it become a starting point of un-making of one's home? In addition, how can a family photo play its role in the process of making home for a migrant when he (or she) is away from home? What agency may a family photo carry in the social relations between a migrant and his (or her) family and how may it affect the migrant's idea of home?

I fall into meditation wondering about all of these things. Struggling with its last breath to accommodate its tenants' (the rural-urban migrants') hope for making a better life in the future, this ramshackle courtyard-house also holds its last breath to accommodate its owner's (Grandma Chang's) memory. As it is our (the house's and mine) first meeting, I try to show my respect for it by not asking too much, although I find that there are stories everywhere within the space, both visible and invisible.

## 9. The Moment of Littering

### Non-home Space and Homeawayness

One week after my first visit to the courtyard-house, I manage to move into the house, ready to listen to any stories it might tell: its silent storytelling echoed through every single piece of *xi yang* (Western) brick, the shabby top of a wall or the rubbish piled up in the courtyard, but mainly, through the people who had created and who are still creating stories within the space.

It is noontime. I am busy with my move into the courtyard-house while Yang Cui is preparing lunch for me.

**Yang Cui:** Xiao Chen, come and eat!

Yang Cui shouts loudly. She is calling me to have lunch in her room. Compared to Grandma Chang's room, Yang Cui's room is a rather empty one. A broken bed, a shabby table with two stools, a small old television and a bamboo pole serving as a wardrobe; all of these old and gloomy pieces of furniture make the room look more dilapidated. However, within these ten square metres, the space is multifunctional: it is a bedroom, a living room and a dining room. I am asked to sit down on one stool, next to the shabby table with a dish (rib with bitter melon) and two bowls of rice on it.

**Yang Cui:** Oh! I almost forgot the braised goose meat<sup>48</sup> I bought just now!

Yang Cui walks towards the TV and gets the bag of braised goose meat, which she puts on top of the TV. She tears the plastic bag and empties the meat onto a plate. As my eyes have been following what Yang Cui is doing while waiting for her to start the lunch, I am searching for a rubbish bin in her room for the greasy bag. However, I am stunned by what I see at this very moment: the bag flashes through the doorframe and accurately lands on the top of a rubbish pile in the courtyard.

She seems quite pleased with her successful 'long shot'. But when she turns to the table, her self-satisfied smirk meets my bewildered stare of great astonishment and puzzlement.

**Yang Cui:** Ah, here, everyone does it like that... But we don't do it at home... And I

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<sup>48</sup> Both dishes, rib cooked with bitter melon and braised goose are typical Chaoshan local cuisine. Yang Cui chose them especially to show her friendliness to me.

never do it in front of my girl (Yang Cui's nine-year-old daughter, who has been left behind in her rural Sichuan home)...

Yang Cui explains herself immediately. She has a daughter (aged nine) who has been left behind in her rural Sichuan home. Yang Cui shares a room here in the courtyard-house with her lover, Lao Bo, who works as a building constructor.<sup>49</sup>

From her immediate verbal response, I read her interpretation of the surprised expression in my eyes as comprising at least two different layers:

1. How can you do that? – *Ah, here, everyone does it like that.*
2. Do you also do this at home? Don't you think it is not a good model for educating your child? – *We don't do it at home... I never do it in front of my girl.*

Language has the potential to engender material realities and vice versa. In the following, I intend to contextualise the first layer of Yang Cui's response in order to 'return [her] elliptical behaviours to their true cognitive homes' (Rapport 1993:129). Then, from the cognitive logic of this first layer, I will try to explore its social implications (within the very process of rural-urban migration) through an analysis of the second layer.

### **First layer: The cognitive logic of '*Here, everyone does it like that*'**

- How can you do that? [As indicated by the look of shock on my face]

- *Ah, here, everyone does it like that...* [She answers.]

In the first layer, outwardly, Yang Cui gives a reason to explain her behaviour (her throwing the plastic bag into the courtyard), and claims that it is acceptable to do it 'here'—'*here, everyone does it like that*'. It is indeed a good reason for me, allowing me to make sense of the piles of rubbish in the courtyard and solve some of the puzzles that had been haunting me since my first house tour: Who throws the rubbish here? (Everyone.) How can they do that? (Because here everyone behaves in this way.) The 'here', which Yang Cui refers to, could be the courtyard-house, or even the whole Bomaqiao. Serious littering makes the whole village look like a huge rubbish dump. It is

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<sup>49</sup> See Chapter Five for more details about the relationship between Yang Cui and Lao Bo.



every single ‘long shot’ (or maybe a short one) performed by ‘everyone’ that has contributed to turning the courtyard into a rubbish dump.

However, if we questioned it further: ‘Why does everyone do it like that?’, or, ‘What is the point of littering?’, then we may need to explore a hidden psychological mechanism.

Let me list the possible meanings of ‘Here, everyone does it like that’ in this situation:

- Here, everyone does it like that* {
1. So I think it is *right* to do it.
  2. So I *should* do it as well.
  3. So I just follow them.
  4. So why not?

Obviously, we can easily rule out the first possibility from Yang Cui’s two remarks: ‘We don’t do it at home’ and ‘I never do it in front of my daughter’. For the second one, it can also be readily discarded because it is not logical, in a very commonsensical way, to just litter more. Differently, the third one agrees with popular psychology. It could be the one that reveals what Yang Cui claims as her right to do it ‘here’. To Yang Cui, the right to litter ‘here’ may come from her just following others and not from the very littering behaviour itself. Then, if the third one is what Yang Cui uses to explain her behaviour, the fourth one may be the one through which I try to explore her inner world (her psyche) in order to explain her behaviour and the social phenomenon of littering, if possible.

‘Here, everyone does it like that, so why not?’ This logic implies that the very action of littering can bring some potential benefit for the actor. Or, if someone does not litter, he (or she) may be losing something. If this is the case, then how can one benefit from littering? What is the loss if one does not litter among a littering community? Temporary convenience? Even at the cost of a dirty living environment? But it is the only excuse I can imagine for them. It is similar to the very common phenomenon of drivers in Bomaqiao who are notorious for driving through red lights. I always wonder about the traffic violators who drive through a red light just for the sake of temporary convenience, even at the cost of their life. I do not want to go into the details of the psychology of

traffic violation. I will turn back to Yang Cui's point—'Here, everyone does it like that'.

'Here, everyone does it like that' is a very familiar statement to me. I heard it again and again during my fieldwork in Bomaqiao. For example, the following example comes from an argument I heard between Shunxin and his son in his factory workplace.

It is the morning of January 17<sup>th</sup>, 2012, in Shunxin factory. I, Yang Cui, and about another ten migrant workers are busy assembling plastic pieces into toys. Shunxin, the factory owner comes in with his son, who works in Guangzhou and returned to Shantou for the Chinese New Year holiday:

'But I am not a peasant! I know nothing about farming! I work with computers!' Xiao Liang argues in a low voice. But he feels weary due to the constant nagging from his father.

'Here, everyone does it like that! Nobody works in the fields these days but they all have agricultural *hukou*<sup>50</sup>. Shunxin almost loses his patience with his son, in whom he has always taken pride.

'You are such a moron! Each piece [of land] could be worth more than a hundred thousand yuan [approx. £10,000].' The argument stops with these last words from Shunxin, and a week-long silence between Shunxin and his son begins.

The argument has been triggered by a possible local land distribution policy. Since the 1990s, the Bomaqiao local government has started to distribute the very last pieces of farmland to agricultural household villagers and encouraged them to build factories (small family-run ones). In the wake of rumours about new land distribution in Bomaqiao in 2011 and 2012, Shunxin is so keen to push his son who now has a non-agricultural *hukou* and works in Guangzhou city to change it into an agricultural one (in order to get more land for adding an extension to his factory), although this can only be achieved through bribery. But his son disagrees with him. I will not go into details of this family's moral conflict but I would like to focus on the statement from Shunxin: 'Here, everyone does it like that'.

In this case, Shunxin attempts to take advantage of the local land policy, although it is

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<sup>50</sup> A *hukou*, a household registration record officially identifies a person as a resident of an area and includes a classification of an individual as an 'agricultural' or 'non-agricultural' citizen, known as the '*hukou leibie*', the status or type of *hukou* registration.

illegal to obtain the additional part. What minimises his moral concern (about pursuing illegal activities) is the same intention as ‘everyone’ has. Regardless of whether the ‘everyone’ Shunxin points to only exists in his mind or whether it is the everyone that he witnesses in reality, it is this perception (or perception spurred by facts) that ‘Here, everyone does it’ that makes him feel silly if he or his family do not do that, or that makes him feel like he is losing something. This shares almost the same cognitive logic as the cases of littering and traffic violation, only with a more manifest interest-driven motivation (‘Each piece could be worth more than a hundred thousand yuan’), against moral concern (bribery).

From cases such as littering, traffic violation and illegal land possession, we can argue that the phrase ‘Here, everyone does it like that’ is not just an individual statement but a common one, shared in the minds of people asserting their right to belong ‘here’. It is a piece of formulaic exchange, which generates its own borders, by everyone involved and becoming involved, by whoever belongs to ‘here’. But ‘here’ is not necessarily a fixed geographic concept but an idea with fluidity. It differs according to the context in which it is employed.

To Shunxin, ‘here’ refers to the Bomaqiao at large. In the case of littering, Yang Cui may just be talking about the courtyard-house or she may also be referring to the whole Bomaqiao. But surely, ‘here’ is somewhere that Yang Cui does not regard as home. I now turn to the second layer of the cognitive exploration of Yang Cui’s response (to the shock in my sensitive face after her ‘long shot’): her concern about ‘being not at home’ and ‘being at home’.

### **Second layer: Analysis of ‘*We don’t do it at home*’**

- ‘Do you also do this at home? Don’t you think that is not a good model for educating your child?’ [To Yang Cui, my expressive face may ask her.]

- *We don’t do it at home... I never do it in front of my girl.*

If the first layer serves to justify her right to litter ‘here’, then for the second layer, Yang Cui’s deictic focus positions her somewhere else: not ‘here’ but there, i.e., home. On the

one hand, she clarifies the conditions that led to her being drawn into a forceful littering habit: she only does this when she is participating within such a littering community, where everybody is involved in such a routine and formulaic practice. When she is at home, she does not do that, especially when she is with her daughter. On the other hand, she distinguishes herself from the local Bomaqiao people. In the first layer, the subject, 'here everyone', may include both migrant workers and local people. In the second layer, she changes it into 'we', which excludes the locals. Quite often in our daily conversations (I usually sat next to her in the assembly workshop in the toy factory and worked while talking with her), Yang Cui uses the word 'we' referring to herself and the migrant workers whom she knows well in Bomaqiao. In this case, 'we', used as a grammatical subject, immediately breaks 'everyone' up and separates the migrants from the locals. More than that, the 'we' behaves completely different in the two places—'here' (away from home) and 'at home'.

No matter what 'here' Yang Cui refers to, the courtyard-house or the broader Bomaqiao area, neither is her true home. To Yang Cui, home is somewhere else and other, far away in rural Sichuan; home is where she and her fellow villagers do not litter (at least as she claims). But why? Why is this activity associated with their being away from home? Following the logic of her first statement ('here, everyone does it like that'), one possible reason is that they (Yang Cui and some other rural-urban migrants) do not litter at home because there, nobody litters. The other possible reason is that home is not a space for littering. If we adapt Mary Douglas's (1966) classic formulation of *dirt*, then on this occasion, to Yang Cui, litter at home (not *here*) is 'matter out of place'. However, since home is not here in the courtyard-house (or the broader Bomaqiao area), for Yang Cui (and for other migrant workers who live in the house and also throw litter in the courtyard), the rubbish pile in the courtyard is not necessary 'matter out of place' to her. In contrast, for Grandma Chang, because the courtyard-house is her home, the rubbish pile in the courtyard *is* 'matter out of place', as she believes that the courtyard is for family gatherings and clan activities; ideally, it is supposed to be tidy and clean, decorated with green plants, and not used as a space for discarding waste. Here, I am less keen to further pursue people's perspectives of dirt (or litter) within home and non-home spaces; I am more interested in people's (specially migrants') perspectives of space in

their two ways of being-in-the-world: being-at-home and being-away-from-home, and the implications of these two ways, both socially and individually.

### **Social implications of Homeawayness**

In China, most rural-urban migrants return home once a year, usually during the Chinese New Year. Thus, most of the time of a year they are not at home. However, they are not homeless. They are away-from-home. To some degree, being-at-home for them becomes their annual holiday while being-away-from-home comes to stand for their everyday life. Experiencing everyday life for most of the time somewhere that is not home, they possess (or are possessed by) an alternative sense of being-in-the-world, which I would like to term 'homeawayness' (analogous to 'homelessness').

Deriving from either a sense of alienation or a lack of belonging, homeawayness is a state in-between being-at-home and homelessness. The term 'homeawayness' implies two crucial features: firstly, having a rooted home somewhere else, whether concrete or imagined; secondly, having one's everyday life uprooted from that home, with spatial or/and temporal distance. It emphasises the spatial dimension (somewhere else) of one's experience of home as well as the temporal dimension (either in the past or in the future; not at present). Since one anchors oneself to a home not here and now, one places oneself in a *liminal* position of being not at home but also not homeless. The two features distinguish homeawayness from both of its extremes: being-at-home and homelessness. One can be at home when one 'inhabits a cognitive environment in which one can undertake the routines of daily life and through which one finds one's identity best mediated' while being homeless occurs 'when such a cognitive environment is eschewed' (Rapport and Overing 2000: 161). Since such a cognitive environment can be found or lost at any time and in any place, being at home is not necessarily bounded by a physical space within a certain time while being homeless does not necessarily imply being expelled from it. So, neither being-at-home nor homelessness is like homeawayness.

For the Chinese rural-urban migrants, homeawayness represents a typical sense of being-in-the-world: A consciousness of being away from their rural home and floating in the urban space (before they have the mind to settle down in the urban space). What attached with the rural-urban migratory process in China, there is a spreading sense of

homeawayness that emerges within the urban space, and is especially dense among the floating migrant population. As one sense of being-in-the-world, homeawayness expresses the migrants' perception of an urban or fast-urbanising space. On a small-scale, Bomaqiao represents precisely this kind of space, inasmuch as it accommodates a substantial population of rural-urban migrants. More specifically, in the case of littering, Yang Cui has never perceived the courtyard-house (a space that is used to accommodate migrants like her) as 'home'. Her sense of homeawayness thus manifests itself in the act of her 'long shot' into the rubbish pile at that moment.

As I mentioned before, such a 'long shot' is not peculiar to those living within the physical space of either the courtyard-house or in Bomaqiao more broadly. Littering has become a common behaviour: indeed, 'Here, everyone does it like that'. Mary Douglas (1991) argues that home is definable as a pattern of regular practices through which communitarian realities appear. Ironically, we find that littering, as one of these regular practices, contributes to the routinisation of the space-time of the courtyard (or Bomaqiao) as a *non-home* space. If we perceive home as the routinisation of space-time, which, after Douglas, may 'provide a model for redistributive justice, sacrifice, and the common, collective good' (Rapport and Overing, 2000: 157), then we can see the reflection of the *non-home* image in such a courtyard by, on the one hand, the flood of rural-urban migration on the surface and, on the other, the flood of homeawayness underneath. It is the powerful flood of homeawayness that sweeps away the beauty of the courtyard garden and leaves the rubbish piles. Through the very act of littering in the courtyard-house, we can catch a glimpse of a moment when such a *non-home* space-time is structured functionally, aesthetically and morally by a migrant worker.

## 10. Packing for Returning Home Re-turn or New-turn?

*Homeland, for the Jew, has always been a text...*

*Each re-reading was a return home.*

-- Nigel Rapport (2012: 105)



Figure 56 - A toy factory recruitment advertisement papered on an electric pole in Bomaqiao  
(Photograph by the author)



It is January 20<sup>th</sup>, 2012. Chinese New Year is approaching. Throughout the nation, both local media and the state news broadcast reports about *chunyun* (Spring Festival travel rush) and *mingong fanxiang* (peasant-workers returning home). Bomaqiao is filled with advertisements from factories that seek to recruit migrant workers for the coming year, since many migrant workers move from one factory to another after their trip home over Chinese New Year holiday. In her room in the courtyard-house, Xiao Bin is busily packing for her trip home for Chinese New Year.

She is in her mid-twenties, also from rural Sichuan, where she left a six-year-old son when she came to Bomaqiao a year and a half ago. In that time she has worked in dozens of different toy factories, and is currently employed at Shunxin Toy Factory. As one of more than a hundred million rural-urban migrant workers, she is part of the army of people constituting the Spring Festival travel rush in China.

I attempt to help her pack. Not surprisingly, most of the things are for her son. The items she packs are mainly clothes, toys and candies. What surprises me is a fancy brand-new mobile phone that she is about to pack into her suitcase. Seeming very pleased with herself, Xiao Bin informs me that it is a gift for her son. With her smiling face and shining eyes, she tells me that she will teach her mother-in-law how to use this smart phone to video-chat. She will then be able to see her son every day, and see for herself how much he grows, and so on and so forth. She talks and talks; as usual, whenever she mentions her son, there is no end.

I know that, as a migrant worker, Xiao Bin misses her little son very much. He is taken care of by his grandmother at her home in a small village in Sichuan province. She talks about her son almost every single day, and thinks about returning home for a short while to see her son (although she only returned home once last year). Holding the new phone that has the video-chat feature, it seems that she has found a solution to her homesickness. She knows that she will stay at home with her son for just a short while during the Chinese New Year holiday. Without that phone, she may again linger over the thoughts of her son when she comes back to work in Bomaqiao. So, to Xiao Bin, the phone will change things for the better. She is convinced that having the daily video-chat with him will help her adapt better to being away from her home and son. At first glance, it seems that the smart phone, with its video-chat feature—this new technology—has the

power to overcome the problem of distance between a young migrant mother and the little son who is left behind. However, I soon find that beyond this, there is a more fundamental power that drives such a young migrant mother to be able to manage the difficult situation of distance.

### **Xiao Bin's life-project: Cosmopolitan living**

There is a bundle of recruitment ads from toy factories nearby, left on the floor while all the other things have been packed into the suitcase. With great surprise and curiosity, I hold them up to have a close look before I try to squeeze them into the suitcase. Right at that moment, Xiao Bin stops me. In serious tones, she explains that those recruitment ads are her *ming gen zi* (things as important as one's life), which should be kept in her backpack. She must not lose them.

This is the first time that Xiao Bin shares with me her future dream: to bring these recruitment ads back home and distribute them in her village, and bring fellow villagers to work in the factories in Bomaqiao. If successful, she will earn fees from the factories, which could become her 'first bucket of gold' to support her further plan of having her own business in Bomaqiao—a small clothes shop. She wishes to have her own business, no matter how small it may be. She does not want to be just a factory girl her whole life. I am reminded of Lao Jin, a migrant who runs a noodle shop in Bomaqiao: Xiao Bin's eyes fill with envy and admiration whenever she mentions Lao Jin.

Xiao Bin looks triumphant when she describes her plan. She holds up the recruitment ads carefully, as if holding a seed of hope that will grow up to be a flourishing tree. She then hugs the bundle of recruitment ads. At this very moment, I can feel that her imagination is filled with visions of future brightness. Her trip home for Chinese New Year will be a crucial step in that future—to plant the seed. She emphasises that if she succeeds in bringing fellow villagers to work in Bomaqiao, these recruitment ads will not only bring her money (through recruitment fees), but more importantly, *people*. 'The more *laoxiang* (fellow villagers) here, the easier it is to do something.' I show that I agree by nodding. She speaks with a smile: 'You know, last year when I returned home, the villagers treated me differently. I felt that I had become important because I had seen the outside world.' Xiao Bin is one of several who have moved out to 'the outside world'

from her home village in a remote mountain area of Sichuan.

‘The outside world is my future. Maybe, for my home, I was born to belong in the outside world.’ She continues, and her voice is filled with more and more confidence. To Xiao Bin, the idea of home exists because there is an outside world, and the outside world exists because there is a home; but the two may become one.

Inasmuch as a migrant’s idea of home may change from time to time, so may one’s idea of the outside world varies with one’s idea of home. That is to say, the relationship between one’s ideas of home and the outside world is not fixed. They are mutually constitutive from moment to moment. In what follows, I offer some examples of the relationship articulated by Xiao Bin between ideas of home and her corresponding understanding of the outside world. These emerged over the course of a year’s worth of conversation in different situations.

<b>Ideas of Home</b>	<b>‘The Outside World’ (<i>Waimian de Shijie</i>)</b>
‘My rural village in Sichuan’	‘Like here, where I am now (Shantou)’
‘Rural areas’	‘Cities’
‘Here (Shantou)’	‘Somewhere I’ve never been’
‘Here (China)’	‘You are in the real outside world (UK)’
‘There, very few things I can do’	‘Where with opportunities...’
‘It’s more about my childhood’	‘My future’

**Figure 57 - Xiao Bin’s interpretations of ‘home’ and ‘the outside world’**

Although she was born in a remote mountain village, Xiao Bin believes that she does not just belong to the small village. At the specific moment when she packs for home, to Xiao Bin, the outside world is the Chinese urban environment, especially eastern coastal cities such as Shantou. Having left her home village in inland China, and now planning to establish herself in a coastal city and make a home in that outside world, Xiao Bin has been building her ‘life-project’ (Rapport, 2003). Her first step is to set up a small clothes shop in the near future. Through building a life-project, her ideas of home and the outside

world are almost overlapping—to be at home in the world.

To be at home in the world, for one thing, one needs to have a home in one's mind, a clear idea of home, no matter whether an imagined one or a concrete one, from one's past, present, or future. Those clear ideas of home exist in particular moments of individual consciousness—they are especially obvious in moments when one consciously attempts to make sense of one's self and others, home and the world, and the relations among them. What parallels the corresponding relation between home and the outside world is the relationship between the self and others. As the former changes, so does the latter. For migrants, home can be a centre for their sense of who they are but also somewhere to which they can return. It can also define what they are not: from the first step a migrant makes out of the home, home village, home town, or home country, they begin to distinguish themselves from those fellow villagers who are staying still in the home place. Although this sense of being different from other villagers may be traced to this very first step, it may not be as obvious to a migrant at that moment since it could be concealed by their excitement (or anxiety) about being in the outside world for the first time. In contrast, when a migrant 'returns' home after having sojourned in the 'outside world' for a period of time, his (or her) sense of being different is too obvious to ignore. When Xiao Bin returned to her home village last year she gained a specific sense of self-worth.

From Xiao Bin's perspective, although she believes that she belongs to the outside world, it is home that gives her the power to move out to the outside world. As she said: 'Maybe, *for my home*, I was born to belong in the outside world'. Her ideas of *home* and *the outside world* are mutually constitutive: without home, there will be no outside world, and vice versa.

To be at home in the world, again, one needs to include the outside world in one's home, though one's comprehension of 'the outside world' may vary from moment to moment (see Figure 57). For Xiao Bin, the outside world has not yet become her home in such a way that she can feel that she is at home in the world. However, with her life-project taking shape, her idea of home and the outside world may be merging towards a point—a point that harmonises and synthesizes home and the outside world: a kind of cosmopolitanism. Her life-project, from this perspective, can be understood as a kind of 'cosmopolitan living' (Amit and Rapport, 2012: 75).

According to Rapport (2012: 75), ‘cosmopolitanism is a kind of space for human expression and for individual emancipation’. Rapport gives us three key words to describe the kind of human life that cosmopolitanism envisages: ‘movement, voluntarism and fulfilment’ (ibid.). Here, in a world of movement as experienced by Chinese rural-urban labour migrants, ‘cosmopolitan living’ is understood as a *process* of syncretising the migrant’s ideas of home and the outside world, through the fulfilment of their life-projects. At the point where home and the outside world merge into one, *time* replaces *space* in one’s imagination (of home and the outside world). It is at this very point that cosmopolitanism can be said to come into being, occupying an individual’s sense of being at home in the world. As Rapport concludes, ‘fundamental to cosmopolitan living is that ethos of global guesthood whose anchor is time not space: *Anyone* is recognized as belonging fundamentally to the time of his or her life’ (ibid.: 124).

Returning to the example of Xiao Bin specifically, her statement that ‘the outside world is my future’ tells us vividly of the time-space replacement: the outside world (space) is where her future (time) or her life-project is. For Xiao Bin, being at home in her future or in her life-project will be like being at home in the outside world. Each time Xiao Bin thinks about her plan or her future, she may think about her home—not only her present home but also her future home.

Xiao Bin places the backpack on her shoulders, stuffed with the bundle of recruitment ads, lifts up her fully packed suitcase and leaves her room. Seeing the back of Xiao Bin, leaving the courtyard and heading to Shantou train station to take a train home, I wonder: will it be a ‘re-turn’ (home) or a ‘new-turn’ (for her life-project)?

### **A ‘re-turn’ or a ‘new-turn’?**

Will it be a ‘re-turn’ or a ‘new-turn’ for Xiao Bin? Can a migrant really return home? In his book *Migrancy, Culture, Identity*, Iain Chambers (1994a: 74) argues that, for migrants, to ‘go home’ again becomes impossible since ‘[t]his means to find oneself subject to ever wider and more complex web of cultural negotiation and interaction’. Or, as Sara Ahmed (1999: 343) puts it, ‘the movement of selves between places that come to be inhabited as home involve the discontinuities of personal biographies and wrinkles in the skin’. Both authors tell us of the continuous change selves undergo throughout the migratory process.

Furthermore, their arguments point up the intimate relationship between one's self and one's home. As Ahmed reminds us, '[h]ome is not exterior to a self, but implicated in it' (ibid.: 343). In other words, '[h]ome is not a phenomenon that lies outside of the individual... The individual is embedded in the home-making process' (Cubero 2015: 6). In migration, one's self and home, one's life-course and home-making, are one and the same, and highly intimately experienced. From this perspective, one can never leave home since home is always within one's mind, and one can never return home since either one's self or one's home is ever changing. Ahmed (1999: 343) reasons, '[t]he process of returning home is likewise about the failures of memory, of not being inhabited in the same way by that which appears as familiar'. In this sense, the movement in-between leaving home and returning home is not circular.

If we agree that it is not possible for migrants to 'return' home, then, is the movement linear? The answer is 'partly yes' and 'partly no'. It is 'partly yes' since migration is a one-way trip in the sense that there is no home to go back to, as has just been discussed. It is 'partly no' due to the fact that on no account can we prevent a migrant (or any human being) from taking steps to return home. At least, there is no way to root out one's very intention or desire to return home—no matter the geographical territory of one's origin or cognitive home, that of one's past or future. Home could be in the form of a text that, as for the religiously observant Jew, 'each re-reading was a return home' (Rapport 2012: 105). Home could also be marked in a photographic postcard that transports one back home by sustaining one's nostalgia of a remembered landscape (Naguib 2010). Or again, one might return home through inscribing a sentiment on a piece of *qiaopi* letter and mailing it home. In short, it is these attempts to return home, these real actions such as re-reading a text, re-viewing a postcard, and writing family letters again and again, that make the movement non-linear.

As in Xiao Bin's case, each attempt to return home is also a construction of one's idea of home and a way of home-making. Each time Xiao Bin collects a piece of recruitment leaflet from a factory, she is compelled to re-visit her life-project that culminates (for now) with her plan to open a clothes shop in the future. Each time she is reminded of her plan, she experiences a return home—a home that is shaped by her sentimental attachment to her imagined future. This is a non-linear movement: with each return she

does not get back to her starting point to form a circle, but instead follows a spiral curve that always leads further and further away from the origin, though whether it has an upward or downward trajectory is debatable. In a word, each return forms a movement that is neither circular nor linear but spiralling onward.

So, how does a migrant's sense of homeawayness relate to home-making in light of this spiralling trajectory? In Yang Cui's case, at the very moment when she sensitively defines the courtyard as *non-home* space through her self-justification ('*We don't do it at home*') for her act of littering, simultaneously, she is fashioning a conscious image of her (ideal) home (at least in one aspect). Throughout her migratory process, each time she consciously builds an intangible wall between *home* and *non-home* space, she may imagine home, either sketching its profile or colouring a detail of it. Again and again, she constructs and reconstructs a sense of home. To some extent, this shows us the way that home comes to exist in moments of individual migrants' consciousness, and the processes through which home is constituted when one is away from home. In other words, it is the sense of homeawayness that brings us to a migrant's understanding of home, and his (or her) imagination of what an ideal home is supposed to be. Since '[t]o imagine is to begin the process that transforms reality' (Hooks, cited in Chambers 1994a: 9), the imagination may be reflected in reality as one's aspiration of making a home, a home that is either based on a past one or a future one; or, may be manifested as one's desire to return to the original home or to reach a future home. In this sense, beneath manifest expressions of homeawayness may lie a deeper cognitive layer that undergirds the migratory process, which is to say the making of home is a continuous process shaping a spiralling trajectory, essential to crafting the life-course of the migrants.



## Chapter Four

### Making Home on the Move

#### *Work at a Factory House*



**\* Foggy morning. I walk into you, seeing your past. \***

The whole industrial park is wrapped in heavy fog. I see no grey sky. I see no smoke from factory chimneys. I see no recruiting posters on factory walls. I see no delivery trucks moving around. I lose sight of your industrial figure in the heavy fog. I see your past.

*I see your past in my imagination.*<sup>51</sup>

*You have had a poetic name, for centuries.*

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<sup>51</sup> The lines in italic are extracted from my field notes.

*It is 'Bomaqiao'.*

*'A bridge for mooring horses', literally it means.*

*There was a large stone arched bridge, aged though looking firm, memorably it tells.*

*It is my childhood memory of you.*

*A little girl came from town, getting close to you with her grandfather,*

*You embraced her with blue sky and a clean stream under the bridge.*

*The arch crossed a running stream, clean and clear.*

*The blue sky was your backdrop, dressed with a floating white cloud.*

*Under the sky was a vast paddy field, like a great piece of golden cloth  
embroidered with green ridges in-between each small piece.*

*Near the bridge, there was a big tree leading to a path.*

*The local people called it 'malu' (horse-road).*

I had always imagined that there would be many people travelling with horses passing by, and that must be why the local people called you 'Bomaqiao'. An image now appears in my imagination: A place depicts itself full of people travelling with horses and a bridge for mooring horses—a *yizhan* (relay station): somewhere as a stop-over on ancient trade roads for caravans transporting goods, with inns for exchanging horses and accommodating riders.

*In my imagination, your poetic name is filled with rich meanings.*

*Somewhere for travellers to moor their horses for a rest*

*—probably to have a few sips of alcohol to keep their spirits up*

*—and then move on.*

*Somewhere that has a path, leading travellers further and to the future.*

*Somewhere that affords travellers a rest before they move on.*

*Isn't this the idea of 'home' to many of us who are constantly on the move nowadays?*

We may 'stop' the movement temporarily by revisiting home or 'returning' home, but the stop is just for a rest in order to gain more energy and then to move on. That is, home comes to exist in our experience of being on the move.

*Life can be pictured as a journey,  
and we are travellers.  
There may be no destination;  
it is the journey itself that is the goal.*

We make smaller and greater movements during our lives, with shorter and longer stops in-between. Along this often bumpy road we constantly come to know who we are, to know others and to know the world.

**\* Clear noon. I stay inside you, feeling your heartbeat. \***

*The fog patches clear at noon.  
And the girl sees no bridge,  
no paddy field,  
but a toy-making industrial park.  
She comes to you once more after 30 years,  
at the exact spot where the bridge once was.  
Now she sees no stone bridge, no arched shape.  
It has been flattened.  
It has become part of the main road,  
for busy trucks,  
for sending toy products from local factories to the world,  
for local and national economic development,  
for your promise to the assigned industrial mission of human history.*

It is the lunch break. After my morning shift, I step out of Shunxin Toy Factory and take a walk around the industrial park. With the busy traffic, noise, pollution and crowds, I feel your heat from inside. You are growing taller and taller; you are expanding to become larger and larger, reaching your nearby villages; you are changing faster and faster, with the name ‘urbanisation’, with another name ‘industrialisation’.

*I stand still, inside your body.*

*I feel your breath.*

*I feel your pain.*

I stand by the polluted stream, facing the hundreds of small factories, embraced by the hum of invisible machines. The poster not far away from me keeps reminding me: this is a 'Farmland Protection Zone', the only piece of farmland that keeps your original identity, your history, your ancient consciousness.

*I walk, moving within your body.*

*I feel your inner heat.*

You are working so hard, filling yourself with day-shifts and night-shifts. Workers move from one factory to another, looking for full-time working hours: three working shifts per day, from 7:30am until 10:30pm, 30 days per month with one day off. Factory owners claim that missing time means missing the market. An order for the Christmas market to Europe may require all of the migrant workers in a toy factory to work overnight for almost a whole week, with double-pay. Even the local elders are not enjoying the sunshine; they are not knitting but assembling toy products for wages. 'Hurry up, work hard and earn more money for a better future life', the inner voice of everyone here inside you is heating up your body—your industrialising body, your urbanising body. Your 'ing' body in transition, in turn, accommodates 'travellers' (the migrant workers, the factory owners, the youths, the elders, basically, everyone here inside you) to gain more 'energy' in order to 'move on' ('to earn more money for a better future life') along their life journey. At present, you are holding the dreams of every single individual 'traveller' inside you. At present, you are also holding the industrial mission of all humankind, together with many transitional bodies like you.

**\* Night falls. I step out of you, wondering about your future. \***

*Night falls, dimming your stage.*

I step out of the industrial park and start wondering about your future: what 'post-

industrial’ image will you have? I have no answer. At present, what I can explore are lives, bodies and mind-sets inside you, within the industry-park, within a factory, within an assembly workroom, within a moment of being.

What do big terms like ‘industrialisation’ and ‘urbanisation’ mean to the people at the frontier—in this case, the Bomaqiao local factory owners and the migrant factory workers? Beyond the surface of local economic prosperity, what tensions are expressed in everyday factory lives? In this chapter, I will bring you to my fieldwork (as an assembly worker), my workplace, a factory house, to experience the space that is filled with a floating population and contingent lives. Through moments of being in everyday factory lives, I explore the tensions between the ideas of work and life, and between the local factory owner and the migrant workers. During the exploration, I examine the floating mind-set of homeawayness and how one may make home away from home—the essentially dialectic nature of making home on the move, which returns us to the irreducibility of the self and other.



**Figure 58 - Sewage from a spray-painting factory pouring into the stream in Bomaqiao  
(Photograph by the author)**

## **// The Factory House**

### **A Stage of Live-performance**

The factory house is an assembly factory, where millions of toy products are assembled each year, offering jobs for migrants who come all the way from their remote homes. It is called ‘Shunxin Toy Factory’, named after the owner. It is also a house, accommodating both the owner’s family and some of the factory workers. It shapes their semi ‘homemade’ and semi ‘factorymade’ domestic lives. Like on a stage, within this six-floor factory house, different individual actors have been performing their life dramas, without a script, without rehearsal. Opportunities and uncertainties fill their everyday lives. Different individuals craft their own dreams in different corners within the space of this factory house.

#### **Ground floor: Storage**

The ground floor, which is not a living space, is mainly used for storage. Hundreds of boxes of finished toys are piled one on top of the other in an organised fashion. They look like soldiers in an armed state, awaiting further orders to be sent off to the world. Those markets in the far distance seem to control the fate of these toy products as well as the fate of this factory.

On this floor there are two local gods—the God of Land and the God of Fortune—taking care of the space, taking care of their fate: the toys’, the factory’s, the owner’s and the workers’. To the owner and his family, the shrine for the two local gods on this floor is something especially significant and holy within the factory house. Shunxin’s wife routinely conducts four worships per month—on the first, second, fifteenth and sixteenth days of the lunar calendar of each month all year—praying for good orders and thus for good fortune.

To the workers, the whole point of this floor is the puncher machine. Each ‘Beep-beep’ sound from the machine makes their monthly wage hear-able. ‘Beep-beep’, at around 7:30am, a morning shift starts. ‘Beep-beep’, at 11:30am, the morning shift finishes. ‘Beep-beep’, an afternoon shift begins at 1:30pm. ‘Beep-beep’, it ends at

5:30pm. ‘Beep-beep’, an evening shift starts at 6:30pm. ‘Beep-beep’, a day’s work finishes at 10:30pm. ‘Beep-beep’, it records time from morning to night, from Monday to Sunday, from the beginning of a month to the end, from the moment of receiving a month’s wage to waiting for another.

### **First floor: Assembly workroom**

On the first floor, one large assembly workroom fills the space with only four pillars in-between, together with a toilet in the corner. The workers assemble toy products, one piece after another. They weave their dreams through their repetitive bodily movements. Reproduced below are several extracts from my ‘workroom field-notes’ (notebooks in which I kept most of the casual chats that I had with other workers during the working hours), which express their various dreams:

**Yun:** ...My dream? I don’t know, but I know that if I have one, I will get closer to achieving it each time I assemble one more piece.

**Jiao:** ...The first year when I came here (Shantou city), I always counted the days before I could return home for the Chinese New Year; sometimes I even counted it by hours, by pieces. You know, my highest record is (to assemble) 300 water-pistols in an hour.

**A Bin:** ...After I save enough money, I will look for a girlfriend. Oh, not exactly. I should say, after I have enough money, my girl will find me.

**Liu Jie:** ...My kids. Of course, my kids! Everything is for my kids. Now their living expenses are getting higher and higher. I hope that they will go to university. I need to save more for their university fees... That is all about my dream. They must go to university. I don’t want them to be an assembly worker like me.

**Din:** ...Trust me, I don’t think we can get rich doing this [assembly work]. Life is risky with this deadly job... You know, I invest most of what I earn here into betting. It is the only way to be rich, and no more fucking assembling if I win a bet!

### **Second and third floor: Factory dormitories**





**Figure 59 - Notes on the wall of the second floor stairway (Photograph by the author)**

*'Please be quiet! —Thank you for your cooperation.'* *'For everyone's health, no spitting please!'* There are notes posted on the wall of the stairway, which leads the way to the second and third floors that are used as the factory dormitory. On the surface, the space of these two floors seems neat and peaceful, being well-organised and ordered by numbers.

*Room numbers: 301, 302, 303, 304, 305A, 305B, 401, 402, 403, 404, 405A, 405B.*

*Bunk numbers: 01, 02, 03, 04, 05, 06, 07, 08, 09, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31, 32.*

*Sink numbers: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8.*

*Toilet numbers: 3-1, 3-2, 4-1, 4-2.*

*Price: 80 yuan per bunk per month.*

*Plus 10 yuan for electricity bill and 5 yuan for water bill.*

The ‘neat and peaceful’ illusion can also be found in the factory owner’s ‘Worker Register Book’. For example, the four pages below show us how workers’ lives in the factory house had been ‘recorded’ by numbers and dates on the register book.<sup>52</sup>

<p><b>(2012 Sept-Dec, Page 8) Female Room</b>  <b>Room 302, Bunk bed 08, Sink 2, Toilet 3-1</b></p> <p>Mrs Zhong, ID No. xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx  Move in: 01-09-2012 [move from 401]  Move out: 02-10-2012</p> <p>Xiao Jie, ID No. xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx  Move in: 02-10-2012  Move out: 28-10-2012</p> <p>Mrs Zhong, ID No. xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx  Move in: 28-11-2012.  Move out: __-__-__</p>	<p><b>(2012 Sept-Dec, Page 9) Female Room</b>  <b>Room 303, Bunk bed 09, Sink 3, Toilet 3-2</b></p> <p>Liu Jie, ID No. xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx  Move in: 01-02-2010  Move out: __-__-__</p>
<p><b>(2012 Sept-Dec, Page 13) Male Room</b>  <b>Room 304, Bunk bed 13, Sink 3, Toilet 3-2</b></p> <p>Din, ID No. xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx  Move in: 01-07-2012  Move out: 12-09-2012</p>	<p><b>(2012 Sept-Dec, Page 18) Female Room</b>  <b>Room 401, Bunk bed 18, Sink 5, Toilet 4-1</b></p> <p>Xiao Huo, ID No. xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx  Move in: 01-09-2012  Move out: 17-09-2012</p> <p>Xiao Qing, ID No. xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx  Move in: 01-10-2012  Move out: 30-12-2012</p>

However, lives are not always as peaceful as can be ‘ordered’ into dry numbers and dates. Beneath the orderly surface, fluidity, extra-hard work, turbulent thoughts, messy

<sup>52</sup> Shunxin keeps three ‘Worker Register Books’ per year (Jan-Apr, May-Aug and Sept-Dec), with details such as names of the factory workers, their ID numbers, their move-in and move-out dates, room numbers and bunk bed numbers. Due to ethical concerns, I do not present the workers’ ID numbers on the pages.

accidents or love stories create the noise of the space. In what follows are some snapshots of rich or mysterious lives beyond the pages of the ‘Worker Register Book’, samples from which I have shown above.

**Mrs Zhong: *‘Our generation can bear hardship, not like your generation.’***

Mrs Zhong comes from Inner Mongolia. She was born in 1962. She is a retired nurse and she has a limited retirement pay (but not enough for her living). She first left home and came to Shantou in 2007 when her elder daughter moved to Shantou due to marriage. She worked extra hard. She moved from one factory to another for full-time work shifts. In early October 2012 she left Shunxin Toy Factory because of a lack of work shifts and she came back in late November due to the full-time work shifts. Quite often she carried a big bag of half-made products back to her dorm after the evening shift, and assembled them until late at night (the workroom is closed from 11pm to 7am if there is no overnight work shift). She was in room 401 but soon after a bed became available in room 302, she moved down to the second floor since she has a bad leg. Each time I saw her pulling the heavy bag going upstairs, I could not help but give her a hand. She kept herself busy. There must have been a reason; I always wondered what it was. But she never told me why she worked so hard. Instead she would say, ‘our generation can bear hardship, not like your generation’; that was her cliché.

**Xiao Jie: *‘I don’t trust anyone, even myself.’***

Xiao Jie moved into room 302 in October when Mrs Zhong left. She came to the factory but only worked for one month before she left. She was born in 1988 in a village in Xinye, Henan province. She was quiet, looked unhappy. I attempted to talk to her several times but she gave me reluctant responses. She moved in with a small luggage bag and she always brought it: to work, to lunch, to the toilet, to the shower. I once asked her politely why she did that when I bumped into her outside the toilet on the first floor, face to face. She walked away from me and firmly threw stone-like words into the air: ‘I don’t trust anyone, even myself’. They hit me, heavily.

### **Liu Jie: ‘Mobile phone parenting’ and the ‘left-behind’ children in rural China**

Mrs Liu was born in 1978. She was from a village in Jiujiang, Jiangxi province. She and her husband (he was a building construction worker) had worked in Shantou for over fifteen years. She had worked in Shunxin Toy Factory for several years and lived in room 303. She was a rather kind and pleasant co-worker. We all called her ‘Liu Jie’ (Liu elder sister) in a friendly way. She brought lots of joy to us over our lunch or supper breaks—sitting on her bunk, making jokes. Most of her jokes were about school life; she was told them by her children whom she had left behind: three in middle school and one in primary school. She told me that she worked mainly to afford the children’s current education and their further education. She was an optimistic and happy mother. She knew about her children’s schoolwork in detail through the weekly phone calls with each of them—‘mobile phone parenting’, as Mirca Madianou and Daniel Miller (2011) concisely phrase it. Her children were in Bomaqiao with her and her husband before they reached school age. But they went back to their home village because they could not join the state-subsidized schools in the city due to their ‘agricultural *hukou*’ (rural household registration). This is not just the case for Liu Jie’s family. This *hukou* policy, along with the rural-urban migration in China and some other factors, has resulted in the emergence of the phenomenon of ‘left-behind’ children in rural China.

### **Din: A drunk worker, a fake identity card, a release on bail and ‘1000 yuan is almost nothing compared to what he has earned from me!’**

Din was born in 1985 in Tanghe, Henan province. Din lived in room 304. He rarely worked an evening shift but often went to gamble at night. He liked to gamble while drinking strong alcohol. On that night, he got drunk again. He wielded a kitchen knife on the way back to the factory and claimed that he wanted to kill someone. The local police came to catch him and took him to the police station. They found that Din’s identity card was not a real one. Next day, the Shuxin boss went to the police station and paid 1000 yuan as a bribe to release Din, thanks to his *guanxi* (social networks and relationships) with the local police. The boss bailed him for the sake of *qingyi* (affection with propriety), as he told me; but then dismissed him to avoid further trouble that might be brought by him. Din was fired as soon as he came back to the factory from the police station. He

returned books that he had borrowed from me when he packed his stuff before leaving. At that moment, I did not know what else I could say to him. I just suggested that alcohol and a knife were a very dangerous combination. ‘1000 *yuan* is almost nothing compared to what he (Shuxin) has earned from me!’ He surprised me with this response.



Figure 60 - Rooms reconfigured originally from a spacious balcony and toilets on the second floor  
(Photograph by the author)



Figure 61 - ‘Beware of fire risk. Thank you for your cooperation.’ Notes on a wall on the third floor  
(Photograph by the author)



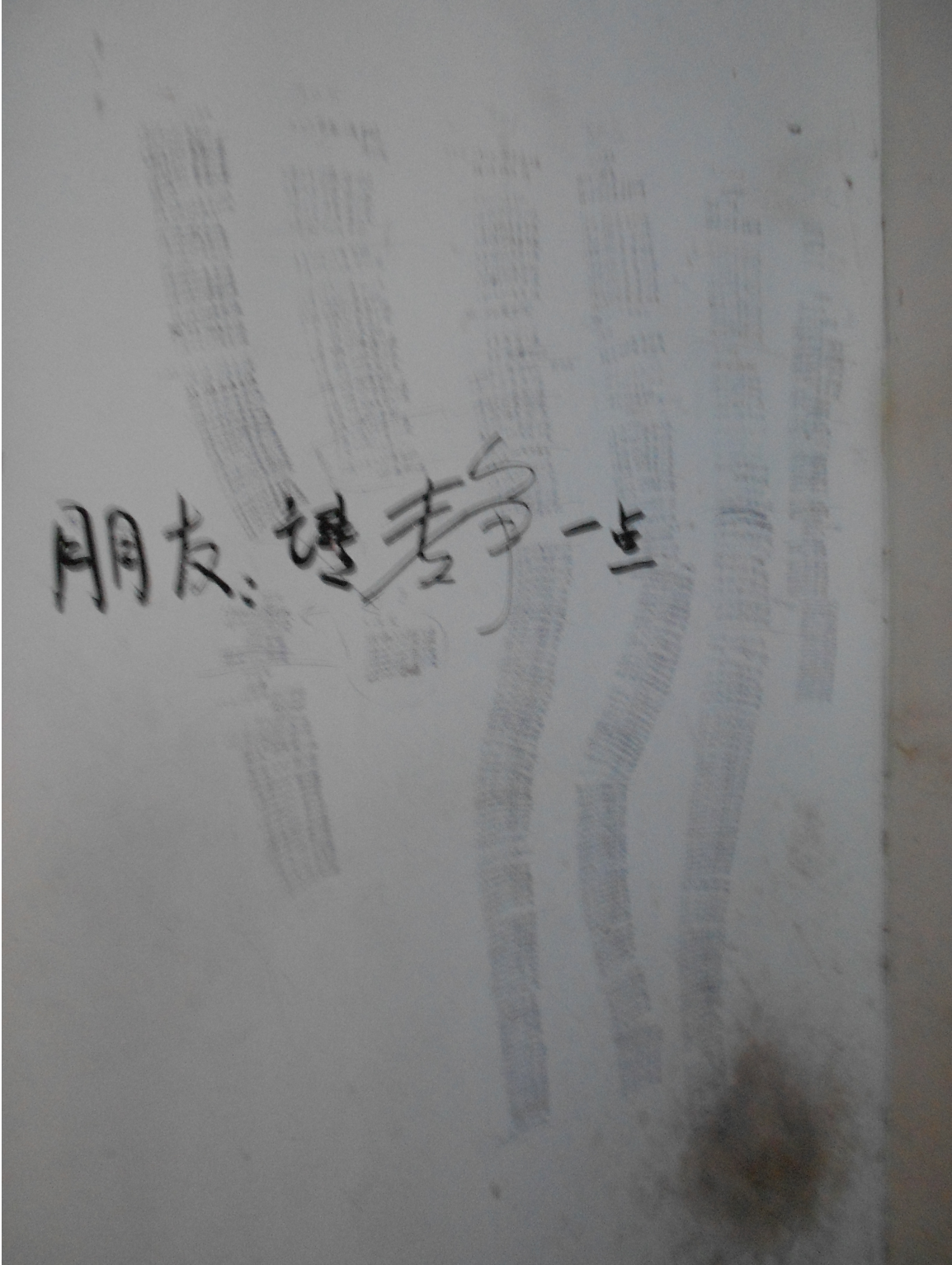


Figure 62 - 'Friends: please be quiet.' A note on the wall of the third floor stairway with full records of the electricity monthly usage (Photograph by the author)

### **The two top floors: Living space of the factory owner's family**

Shunxin and his family live on the top two floors. Although their living space is separated from the workers', their lives cannot be strictly separated.

**Shunxin's wife:** *'I don't want to live with them. I have been more than 48 hours without any sleep. I was totally freaked out by the fire.'*

There was a fire accident in room 401. It was before the evening shift. Xiao Huo, a factory worker, was in her room, 401. She put an electric immersion heater into a plastic bucket with water. She turned it on to heat the water. She then answered a phone call from home. When she finished her phone call, it was already a bit late for her evening shift. She left the room in a hurry and went downstairs for her evening shift. She was the last one to leave the room. She forgot that the water in the bucket was still heating. Two hours passed. Shunxin's wife was washing the dishes after dinner on the fifth floor. She noticed a burning smell coming from downstairs; and it was a fire in room 401! The boiling water eventually dried out and the plastic bucket had caught fire and melted down. The fire had spread to the wooden cupboard next to the bucket. We all ran upstairs to help put out the fire. Fire engines came on the double before the fire began to spread badly. Luckily, no one was injured. Two days later, I met Shunxin's wife. She complained again, 'I don't want to live with them (the workers). I have been more than 48 hours without any sleep. I was totally freaked out by the fire.'

**Shunxin:** *'I am happy for them. My factory brings the couple together; it is yuan-fen.'*

Xiao Qing came to the factory in October 2012 and moved in to room 401 (after two weeks' redecoration due to the fire). She met A Tong who lived in room 402. A Tong worked for the factory, mainly doing product boxing-up, loading and unloading. Xiao Qing often helped him to bring back his drying clothes from the balcony in the evening. Very soon they fell in love with each other. They got engaged at the end of the year. So, the boss Shunxin made a rearrangement for their accommodation, since all of the bunks in the factory house were just for singles, not for couples. Shunxin offered them a room in his old courtyard-house so that they could live together. Regarding the rearrangement, Shunxin told me: 'I am happy for them. My factory brings the couple together; it is



*yuanfen* (a relationship by fate or destiny).’

Nevertheless, life on these two top floors remains ‘remote’ from the workers, though occasionally we could hear arguments between Shunxin and his wife, mainly his wife complaining about Shunxin returning home late at night and the lack of time he spent with his two children. I also overheard gossip about the boss’s romantic affair once while assembling toys in the workroom. Still, to the workers, the space of these two floors is a rather empty space, filled with noises of their different individual imaginations. For instance, it is a kind of dream life to Xiao Bin as she wishes to be a boss in the future; while to Xiao Guan (the workroom ‘manager’) it is just ‘the bosses’ life’—‘We earn money by our hands but they earn money from us,’ he said. However, this might not be the case. In Bomaqiao, the lives behind the simple word ‘factory boss’ can vary a lot.

As a medium scale—having about twenty workers—family-run factory owner, Shunxin spends most of his time outside, drinking with his potential customers in order to fight for better and bigger orders—most deals being sewn up over drinks. He earns money from the factory but at the cost of his health and his family life. It is different for those smaller family-run factories—with less than ten workers—their owners usually also do most of the workers’ jobs: as assembly workers, as unloaders or as drivers, for example. They earn money from their factories and from their own sweat. These two scales, medium and small factories account for a large number of the hundreds of toy factories in and around the industrial park in Bomaqiao. There are only several big factories—with over fifty workers—that are run in the form of a company, with a proper management team and quality-control team. These bosses earn their money from their factories and from their investment and cooperation with other business owners. In short, the different lives of the factory owners cannot be simply flattened into words—like ‘the bosses’ life’.

## 12. Being Nobody but a ‘Monkey’

### Gambling, Work and Live-life

*Human beings are supposed to have a live-life; we are not donkeys!*

-- Yang Cui

#### **Being nobody: The fluidity of factory workers**

Following Yang Cui, I step into the factory-house. Appearing in front of me are boxes of toys ready to be shipped. From this small-scale family-run factory in the east coast of China, these boxes of toys will travel around the world, crossing oceans and continuing on their way to Europe and the Americas. In the right corner, two workers are busy boxing toys up. Yang Cui lifts up her work card, which she wears around her neck, edging closer to a puncher machine. ‘Beep-beep’, the sound signals the start of her morning shift—from 7:30am to 11:30am—and as long as she punches out later at noon, she will earn 32 *yuan* (about 3 GBP) for the four hours.<sup>53</sup>

We walk up to the first floor. It is a big workroom for assembling toy products. More than ten workers are already there; they seem to be having a good time talking and joking. Seated next to Yang Cui, I start to learn how to assemble a toy helicopter by following Yang Cui’s gestures—it is a rather simple and repetitive task. I look up at Yang Cui, smiling at her to express my gratitude for bringing me here, and I wait for her to introduce me to the others in the room. However, she seems to have no intention of introducing me, and no one seems to be bothered by my presence.

There is a clock hanging on the wall. I check the time frequently. I feel that the clock is moving so slowly. It seems as if I have been here for years and years, although actually it has just been half an hour. To me, every fleeting moment is like a slow-motion film. Like a film camera, my eyes reach every single corner of the workroom by moving

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<sup>53</sup> In the Shunxin Factory, only a few assembly workers are paid on a shift basis for four-hour-long shifts, in which case they are paid 32 *yuan* per shift. The others are paid according to the number of pieces they assemble; the more they assemble the more they earn. As mentioned, the morning shift lasts from 7:30am to 11:30 am; the afternoon shift is from 1:30pm to 5:30pm, and the evening shift begins at 6:30pm and ends at 10:30pm. I was told that in toy factories in Bomaqiao, an assembly shift pays between 29 and 40 *yuan*. However, most toy factory owners in Bomaqiao prefer not to pay their assembly workers on a shift basis, because the workers may idle the time away.

slowly; sometimes they even stop moving to focus on a particular scene. Here is what happens in a corner that catches my eye for quite a while:

Not far away from the entrance to the workroom, a young man, aged about twenty, keeps checking his mobile phone (for new messages, maybe) under the assembly table, using his left hand. His right hand side faces the main entrance (where the factory boss may appear at any time). While waiting for messages, he is picking plastic pieces, putting them together, grasping a glue gun hanging on a hook in front of him above the assembly table, gluing two pieces together to make the body of a toy helicopter, and repeating these actions again and again. He does not seem involved, even when the others laugh loudly. Although his body is enclosed in this workroom, a space of about a hundred square kilometres, his mind seems not to be here at all. Through his mobile phone, he manages to be somewhere else outside this working space—an open space where he mentally prefers to be, probably. (Later on, at lunchtime, I was told that he was checking messages from his new girlfriend.) He then walks to the left corner of the workroom (where the CCTV camera's view on the room is blocked by piles of big boxes), and talks with someone (maybe his new girlfriend) in a low voice on his mobile phone...

For about half an hour after I step into the workroom, I feel that I have become almost nobody: invisible and ignorable in the workroom. 'Come on, please ask me something!' It seems I can hear my inner voice, expecting others to be aware of my existence in the workroom.

Before I came to the factory, I prepared a long list of possible questions that I might be asked with 'proper' answers, expecting thus to be 'accepted' more smoothly and to be one of them (the migrant factory workers) more easily, or to make a better impression on them from the very beginning. However, I used nothing from the list I prepared. Far from my expectations, my arrival in the workroom actually raised no interest among the workers. The air in the room was normal: those that worked while chatting continued

their chats and their repeated hand movements. Occasionally someone laughed loudly and a few others followed. The more I paid attention to the surrounding details, the more I sensed my own existing being: being nobody to them while being full of a sense of myself. It was my moment of being, but my appearance in the workroom was just a moment of ‘non-being’ for them.

Contrary to most of the factory owners whom I met during the first month after my arrival of the field and who were cautious about me, the factory workers in this workroom seemed much more relaxed about my joining them. I soon found out that it was a common phenomenon in Bomaqiao for assembly workers (of toy products) to move from one factory to another frequently. Generally speaking, the fluidity of the workers in small family-run factories is greater than in large factories. In large factories, which employ hundreds of workers, the main reason for workers to quit is that they cannot tolerate the rigorous regulations. ‘It seems there is always a pair of eyes watching over me’, Xiao Bin once told me, ‘and you spend too much time on paperwork’. In small factories, the fluidity depended on the uncertain workload that a small factory could offer a worker. It is difficult for a small toy factory to hire assembly workers if it cannot offer enough work shifts. Xiao Bin told me:

*If you are lucky, you will meet a nice factory boss, and you may stay a bit longer. Otherwise, why waste time at one place waiting for more work shifts. No time to wait, to waste... The bosses promised full shifts but always not... I go to where there are available shifts...*

For a small toy factory in Bomaqiao, it is not easy to have orders all the time. Thus, there is no guarantee of being able to offer all workers full time shifts all the time; that is, three work shifts every day with only one day off per month, or three work shifts a day for 30 days a month with every Saturday night off. In Shunxin factory, there are only two long-term workers—Yang Cui and Liu Jie—who have been there for more than two years. In addition, since the workers do not need to sign a contract with the factory owner, they can leave at anytime if a factory cannot offer them enough work shifts. The Shunxin boss once informed me:

*No contract. Nothing! Only very few large factories require copies of their [workers'] identity cards...In Chenghai [a district in Shantou city], there are about twenty thousand toy factories, not including those fabrication plants for spraying or printing, I guess no more than twenty factories sign contracts with workers... Ten, no, no, no, there should be less than ten.*

He stopped for a while and then added:

*You can never really trust the migrant workers; they might leave without a word at any time. They don't appreciate you offering them jobs. Things have changed in these past ten years. Now they require a lot. Last month I just spent money upgrading the hot water shower for them. You need to arrange their accommodation as well. Luckily, I have the old courtyard-house. Otherwise the cost [including the cost of their accommodation] would be too high to hire them. There are only bunks just for singles in this building [the factory house]. In busy seasons, I might need over forty workers when a large order comes... When you need them, they leave you.*

### **Being nobody but a 'monkey': Gambling and work**

After 'being nobody' in the workroom for quite a while, I suddenly hear a question from someone, who seems to be asking me:

**A man:** Hey, what's your *shengxiao* [Chinese zodiac sign]? You. Yes! You....

I turn around, and answer.

**Shuhua:** Me? ...Monkey.

**The man:** Monkey? You are the monkey. Good! Let's bet on the monkey tonight!

The man cheerfully bursts his words out towards everyone in the factory workshop. He is Lao Lin, from rural Sichuan. Lao Lin is 'teased' for being the 'smartest' one among the others in the workroom. He claims that he is always sensitive enough (to me, he is oversensitive) to catch 'magical signs' from various places (e.g. TV programme, radio or 'hint sheets' for the lottery) or everyday random events, although most of the time he loses his bets. To Lao Lin, my presence in the workroom today could be a 'message from

heaven' (*tianji*) manifested as a random event—a new worker joining their workroom. Since monkey is the zodiac sign of my birth year, he believes that tonight's winning number should be associated with the monkey. This was the first and last time that any of the other migrant workers in the workroom, besides Yang Cui, paid attention to me for the whole of that first morning I worked in Shunxin Toy Factory.

They are discussing '*wan ma*' (betting numbers, literally means 'playing lottery'), the betting on a local lottery, for which the numbers (from one to forty-nine) are grouped into the Chinese zodiacs. According to the state government, the lottery is illegal as it is privately run, in contrast to the two legal state-run lotteries, the China Sports Lottery (*tiyu caipiao*) and the China Welfare Lottery (*fuli caipiao*). Although it is identified as an underground lottery, it is prevalent in many places in China.

The lottery first became popular in the 1990s in Guangdong and Fujian provinces, eastern coastal areas in China. The lottery is very popular in the Chaoshan region. Both Chaoshan locals and migrant workers play it. Furthermore, migrant workers do not just play when they work in the coastal cities; when they return home, they also bring the gambling to their rural homes in inland China. In the last two decades, playing this lottery has become common in many rural villages in inland China (Bosco et al., 2009).

In Bomaqiao, it is common for migrant workers to discuss lottery betting while working in the factories. The Mark Six draw is broadcast live on Hong Kong television every Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday evening. Thus, on these three evenings, there were usually empty spaces in our workroom—the workers had gone to place their bets. For the rest of the week, they discuss their betting, exchange guesses from 'hint sheets' that contain riddles, cartoon images and diagrams, and gossip about winners who work in the 'nearby' factories. I found that they always said 'someone from a nearby factory won a big prize', although when I checked twice, I found that there was no such person there.

**Yang Cui:** Monkey has not won for quite a while, has it? Monkey-night tonight?

Yang Cui then speaks to Lao Lin.

**A woman:** How about Thursday?

A woman in her twenties asks Lao Lin.

**Another woman:** Horse? Horse was in my dream last night...

**Lao Lin:** No, no, no... I guess the right number should be chicken. I did some

analysis last night. There is a hint...

Lao Lin is trying to explain again.

**Xiao Guan:** 'Hint? Hint my ass!'

Xiao Guan (the workroom 'manager', comes from Sichuan) teases him again. Everyone laughs. Their conversation continues, full of joyfulness. The joyfulness eventually relieves my tension, not only mentally but also physically—I have been in the same position, assembling the toy pieces for hours.

Chatting about the betting is the most common theme in the assembly workroom. In the morning they usually greet each other by asking 'How's your bet?' 'Do you see any sign (of a number to win)?' Or 'I heard that someone from [...] won!' They talk about how they bet, why they bet certain numbers and animals; they exchange gossip about winners in Bomaqiao and in their rural home. The gossip about a winner may not be true, but it is powerful. Within the limitations of space and time—the space of approximately one hundred square metres of the workroom, and the time that is segmented into constant repetitiveness of picking two pieces of plastic, gluing them together and then lining them up on the table, for four hour long shifts, three shifts a day, thirty days a month—the power of chatting about the lottery lies in the fact that it entertains a working body that is physically within a limited space and time.

For the first few days of working in the factory, I tried very hard to train my body to overcome the 'constraint' of the space and time of the working conditions, and the most useful way was to train my mind to focus on whatever nonsense or meaningful gossip they talked about, to get involved in their conversations, so as to forget my repeatedly moving hands. Playing the lottery while working amuses the confined body within the limited space.

The chatting, discussion and gossip about the betting within the workroom during working hours transferred one's focus from tough conditions to a game-playing atmosphere. Beyond the gambling part, the lottery as a game kills time when one's physical body is 'confined', at least to some degree. This reminds me of a memorable moment when I visited the Wuyi Overseas Chinese Museum (in Jiangmen, China) at the first month of my fieldwork:



Suddenly I turned into somewhere dark. Without any mental preparation, I was immediately horrified by several men dressed in white shirts in this dark, silent and still place. Taking a deep breath, I tried to compose myself before I reopened my eyes to look at them again, carefully. Together with their white shirts, what dazzled my eyes in the darkness was a few white china bowls on the floor, empty, with chopsticks on top of them. I soon realised that this was just a display, demonstrating a scene from a corner in the bottom cabin when *Xia Nanyang* (Chinese labourers migrated to Southeast Asia) in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. There were four clay figures sitting on the floor, all male. Realising the fact that they were just clay figures on display dispensed a bit of my fear, but at the same time it stirred my emotions. The gloomy space made me feel like the air seemed moist and cold, as if I were in the cabin back then. Very shocked, I ended up sitting down on the floor, leaning on the wall of the pathway, imagining that I was in the cabin: in the limited space of the cabin on a ship for more than a month at sea; being hungry most of the time; no window, no light, no fresh air, no shower...

It seemed that I was having a personal experience at that moment so that I could fully understand how important it was to keep one's own mind active in order to survive by playing or gambling. It also reminded me of the several kinds of gambling devices displayed in this museum. One of them was *caihe* (財合) (See Firguez-48). It was accompanied by a note: 'Gambling devices (1910s), used on ships as a pastime when crossing the Pacific'.



**Figure 63 - Gambling devices displayed in the Wuyi Overseas Museum (Photograph by the author)**

To survive the journey both physically and mentally within the gloomy space could be a challenge. The risky journey itself was like gambling with their lives, as both ‘the production and consumption of risk’ (Cassidy, Pisac and Loussouarn 2013). As a kind of play, gambling ‘provides a symbolic re-enactment of the world where man can experience existential freedom’ (Fink 1960 cited in Binde 2009: 46). It was through gambling that the Nanyang migrants found their way to ‘go beyond their present circumstances of being’ (Rapport 2010), to transcend their physical restrictions within the limited space and time to obtain mental freedom. As Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Stith Bennett explicate it:

Like all effective play forms, games of chance successfully delimit, by means of both physical implements and rules, a slice of reality with which the player can cope in a predictable way, thereby *losing himself in a pleasurable state of activity and consciousness, free of either worry or boredom*. It is inherent in the basic structure of the games of chance that they drastically delimit possibilities. ... By being able to foresee the possibilities of the game, the player achieves a measure of control over the environment, a balanced state between chaotic worry and stultifying

boredom—a tenuous area within which he experiences play.

(Csikszentmihalyi and Bennet 1971, cited in Binde 2009: 15)

### **Gambling, work and live-life (*shenghuo*)**

Yang Cui's voice wakes me up and brings my mind back to the workroom setting from the Overseas Chinese Museum. She 'invites' me to play the lottery again.

**Yang Cui:** Fancy betting on your [zodiac] animal as well?

I smile at her, which means 'no, thanks' and then continue to take notes. She has tried to persuade me to bet several times since I moved into the courtyard-house to stay with her.

Yang Cui collects bets. She is *xiedanren* (literally 'someone who writes tickets'). Every Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday evening before the draw, her *laoxiang* (village fellows) come to her to place their bets. She records each of the bets and sends them via text messages to Mei Jie (Mei elder sister). If someone wins, Mei Jie transfers the money to Yang Cui's account, and she pays out the winnings to the winner. For her role, Yang Cui receives six per cent of the bets each time she collects them as commission from Mei Jie. I have never met Mei Jie. She also remained invisible to many other migrant workers in Bomaqiao, although most of them knew the name. In the lottery system, Mei Jie is the lowest-rank bookie among several upper bookies. Lowest-rank bookies pass bets to higher-rank bookies, and then higher ones, until they reach the 'big boss' (the top bookie), Yang Cui told me.

Actually, besides Mei Jie, all of the other tiers of bookies are invisible to Yang Cui, as they are to all *caimin* (betters). The usual way to contact Mei Jie is by telephone or text message. Yang Cui told me that she trusted Mei Jie because this job was introduced by her *laoxiang* (village fellows) and Mei Jie also comes from Sichuan Province. Usually *laoxiang* are reliable, according to Yang Cui. And she only accepts bets from her *laoxiang* as they will not betray her, she believes.

In Bomaqiao, the locals usually place their bets at corner stores run by locals. Migrant workers place their bets at eateries run by migrants or directly with some reputable individuals, like Yang Cui. Without any property like stores or eateries as a guarantee, Yang Cui uses her prestige among the circles of her *laoxiang* (village fellows) as credit. Being a figure among her *laoxiang* in Boamqiao, Yang Cui has *guanxi* (social networks

and relationships) with many migrant workers.

She is very proud to be a bet collector, as the job shows her senior position among her *laoxiang*. As she told me, by collecting bets, she not only earns money but also gains the social reward of *guanxi*. Additionally, she told me that she never loses on the gambling—she only uses the amount she earns from the commission on the bets. Again and again, she proudly shared with me her cleverness and reasoning in playing the lottery.

### ***Shenghuo* (live-life)**

Being invited again by Yang to play the lottery, I couch my refusal in a very polite smile. But this time, she seems somewhat displeased with my refusal.

**Yang Cui:** Oh, you never play... You write, and write, and write... You always write.

[She is occasionally annoyed with my endless note-taking, although she is quite good at ordering me to take notes or not to take them.]

**Yang Cui:** You should *have a live-life* (you *shenghuo*)!

[Yang Cui becomes more and more straightforward to me.]

**Yang Cui:** I wouldn't be able to stand it if I *didn't have a live-life* (wu *shenghuo*)!

[She is very emphatic about this.]

Here, Yang Cui introduces us to a term that is widely used in the everyday life of the Chinese, *shenghuo* (生活, live-life). The term is composed of two characters: 生 (*sheng*) and 活 (*huo*). *Sheng* means to be born, to give birth, to grow or live; it is the opposite of dead. *Huo* means to live, living, alive or vivid, which is the opposite of apathetic. When Yang Cui mentioned that I had no live-life (wu *shenghuo*), she meant a life that is not completely filled with work for survival. It is the bottom line of a living being—*shengcun* (生存, survival), which literally means 'life existence'. She once seriously explained her live-life philosophy to me when she shared the 'secret' of her love affair (see Chapter Five) with me:

*Human beings are supposed to have live-life; we are not donkeys!*

人就应该有生活，我们又不是驴！

In her life philosophy, human beings should not just work for survival, like donkeys.

Beyond working for survival (*shengcun*), there should be a live-life (*shenghuo*); and the two—*shengcun* and *shenghuo*—combined together make one qualify as a human being. Therefore, *shenghuo* is something beyond being alive, characterising a living existence as a human being. One's *shenghuo* can be uniquely expected, strived for, shaped, experienced, remembered (or struggled with, regretted, disappointing). Thus, the term 'shenghuo' (live-life) groups a concept that, on the one hand, expresses the essence of the human condition that goes beyond survival, and on the other hand, emphasises an individual's interpretation of their own life. As a concept, *shenghuo* (live-life) interlinks both the essence of the human condition and the concretised entity of its embodiment in an individual's life.

Nevertheless, neither *shenghuo* nor *shengcun* is just an abstract concept; they are embodied in any kind of life activity at any moment of an individual's existence as long as one realises it. As Yang Cui emphasised—'I wouldn't be able to stand it if I *didn't* have a live-life!'—when she referred to betting on the lottery as a way of having a live-life.

The concretised entity of *shenghuo* (live-life) is found in one's everyday life. In the instance of having food, occasionally making a meal of 'home food' by herself—which was extremely *mala* (hot and spicy, a Sichuan flavour) for me—is a way of *shenghuo* for Yang Cui. Differently, to have dinner at work prepared at the factory canteen—which is usually not *chuanwei* (Sichuan flavour) and not spicy enough for her—is just a means of *shengcun* (for survival). Rather than enjoying dinner at work, she eats it simply to fill her empty stomach in order to stay alive. Having 'home food', either cooked by herself or at a Sichuan-style eatery, is an escape from the humdrum of dinner at work. The specific flavour of *mala* (hot and spicy) stimulates the feeling of satisfaction and enjoyment, even just for a moment while she is chewing the *mala* 'home food' and enjoying it.

Likewise, playing the lottery (*wan ma*) enriches Yang Cui's live-life (*shenghuo*) more due to the 'playing' process than the 'lottery' itself. Playing the lottery is a kind of a live-life (*shenghuo*) to her, which is different from the toy assembly work as a way of survival. Being a bet collector, earning commission, placing bets by using what she earns from the commission, as well as gaining social status from it—all of these balance the tension between her work and life, more specifically, her humdrum existence and live-life. By

doing so, her everyday life is not fully consumed by the monotonous, tedious, and repetitious work shifts. Hence, playing the lottery enables her, in Csikszentmihalyi and Bennet's words, to lose herself 'in a pleasurable state of activity and consciousness', 'free of ...boredom' (1971: 49, cited in Binde 2009: 15).

Like Yang Cui, having a live-life (*shenghuo*) expresses an aspiration to attain a certain way of life, that is, the way(s) in which one wants to live, the way(s) in which one feels at ease, satisfied, or fulfilled. It is noteworthy that when someone speaks about having a live-life, it is relative. One is living in relative comfort, for example, which is either compared with other people's lives or with oneself at another time. It is an individual's perception. There is no absolute standard for a satisfying *shenghuo* (live-life). It may vary from one individual to another. It may vary from one moment to another for an individual.

For instance, to most migrant factory workers in Bomaqiao, *wan ma* (playing lottery), as a game of chance, becomes a way of *shenghuo* (live-life) to amuse them during their rather routine everyday assembly work. Compared with eleven months dwelling in the urban setting away from home, being called '*ghuasengian*' (the local insulting term that refers the migrant workers) by the locals, *shenghuo* happens when they take their 'annual holiday' for the Chinese New Year home trip—being a mother or father to their children again, a son or daughter to their parents, spending quality time with their beloved family. For Yang Cui, compared with eating the relatively tasteless working dinner, a hot and spicy meal that she made herself is a way of *shenghuo* to stimulate the 'taste of home'. However, for me, it was a way of *shengcun* in order to fill my stomach to 'survive' in the field (as the meal seemed too hot and spicy for me). To Xiao Bin, everyday video calls with her son at home became a way of *shenghuo* to relieve her thinking about him. Her ambition to own a clothes shop in the future is a way of *shenghuo* as she is not satisfied with being just a factory girl for her whole life. To Zeng, the moment when he was writing a piece of *qiaopi* might have been a way of *shenghuo* to escape from the hardship of his Thai sojourning life. Each time when he wrote, he was making a journey to his family. The letters served as a way of transport for him to travel home, imaginarily. To Grandma Chang, keeping a family photograph freshens up the way of having a live-life. It brings back happy memories of a reunion with her *xianluo fanke* (emigrant to Thailand) husband.

From these cases we find that, as a kind of reflexivity, one's awareness of having a live-life may exist in one's memory of the past, experience of the present, or imagination of the future. In addition, one's perception of having a live-life (*shenghuo*) always depends on its counterpart *shengcun*, which is not considered a live-life. The heightened consciousness and self-awareness of having a live-life is encapsulated by the more humdrum *shengcun*. Here, *shengcun* can be understood as the 'cotton wool' of everyday 'moments of non-being', while having a live-life is one's 'moment of being' (Woolf 1976), where reflexivity of life experience comes to the fore. To realise and separate one's own life into *shenghuo* and *shengcun*, as Yang Cui had managed to do, 'is for the individual to possess a means by which that life can be filled, shaped and reshaped' (Rapport and Overing 2000: 261) in particular ways. To have a live-life (*shenghuo*) an individual transcends his or her given circumstances of existence considered necessary for survival (*shengcun*).



### 13. ‘Oh, no! ... The toilet is blocked again!’ Difference, Distortion and Discrimination

#### ‘Oh no! ... The toilet is blocked again!’

‘Oh no!’ We hear an angry voice when are working in the assembly workroom while chatting and occasionally joking as usual. It is from the factory owner, Shunxin (we usually just call him ‘*laoban*’, business proprietor). He steps in, angry: ‘The toilet is blocked again!’ The workroom suddenly falls silent. The clock on the wall ticks away the seconds of silence.

It does not seem to be a good month for Shunxin. Just two weeks ago, the toilet was blocked (deliberately, by Lao Li, another worker) and he paid someone to fix it. It is a space used by the workers but maintained by the factory owner, so Shunxin needs to make sure it works properly in order to keep the factory running.

In the left hand corner of the workroom near the stairs is the toilet room. This toilet is mainly used by the assembly workers. No toilet paper is provided. No bin. No mirror. No wash platform. A tap extending from a wall slowly drips water. It seems the least comfortable place to have a break. But in fact, this limited space is particularly popular for the workers over the course of their work shifts: for sending text messages, checking WeChat<sup>54</sup>, and making phone calls, simply because it is the only space without a CCTV camera on this floor. Having no CCTV camera means freedom, as we can also be told from words that they ‘inscribe’ on the wall in front of the toilet:

... ..

*I want to fly!!*

*A Jiao I love you.*

*I miss home so so much!*

*Zhiqiang Lin loves Lijiao Xu.*

*My heart feels so tired, so so tired...*

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<sup>54</sup> WeChat is known in China as *Weixin* (literally, micro message), a smartphone-based messaging app launched in 2011. It has become a major new social media platform for the majority of Chinese in recent years.

*I wait, wait, and wait! When will my money (wage) come?*  
*Don't! Irritate! Me! Fuck your mum! I don't want to work anymore!*  
*Ying, could you please come back to me?*  
*I love you, ten thousand years!*  
*You are my Ying, forever.*  
*I want to kill someone!*  
*I am almost crazy!*  
*Am I still alive?*  
*Where am I?*  
... ..

Most of the inscriptions are within a circle with a diameter about one metre, right in the low-middle section of the wall. This is the physically reachable range when one squats on the toilet. But mentally, as it shows, one's imagination reaches to one's remote rural home or to one's future, far beyond the limited toilet space-time. These inscriptions make each of my silent toilet experiences deafening: as if I had heard their wild inner screams, mixing with desire, hope, love, homesickness, fear, struggle, loneliness, distress, anger, and so on. Beyond its original and practical function as a toilet, it is also creatively deployed as a kind of space for one's expression and imagination.

Shunxin leaves the workroom without saying any more. He seems not to expect any explanation. The silence lasts for another few seconds. As soon as Shuxin has left, the laughter from here and there is like a flood, pouring out from mouths within the workroom space. The workroom resumes as the workers' space. The news about the toilet blockage sets tongues wagging in the air of the workroom:

‘Again? Haha~ ...’  
‘... .. Serves you right! ...’  
‘... .. Alas, a good block! To shut you up, arrogant locals!’  
‘... .. Money is not that easy to earn! Go clean it, you boss! ...’  
‘... .. Yes! The poor rich! Go fix it! ...’

Some laugh with glee, some smile smugly. The toilet blockage news generates a stream of heat in the air within the workroom space. It seems that most workers' sense of

existence suddenly ascends because of the boss's annoyance. Within the brief moment, the toilet blockage news brings all of the workers' attention together. It suddenly becomes their common 'joyfulness', waking them from their sleepy working mode—being robot-like doing toy assembling.

My work continues, as my hands continue their robot-like movement: peeling off a sticky label with 'RESCUE' in large print with one hand, and affixing it to the body of a toy helicopter that I have picked up from a big bamboo basket with the other hand. One has been done; then another one; another one. I line them up on the worktable, for Yang Cui to box them, one by one.

I raise my head and look at Yang Cui. She shakes her head slowly and gently, not in disapproval but with a ghost of a smile resting on her lips, expressing her joy at the toilet blockage news and standing side by side with her fellow workers. Her affable smile to the other workers seems to say, '*You naughty kids*'—the kind of smile that we would usually find on a mother's face as a response to her child's mischievous trick, which is forgivable.

As a '*laoyuangong*' (literarily means old employee)—both in terms of her age compared to the other younger workers here, and in terms of the relatively 'long period' of time she has worked in this factory—Yang Cui does not usually raise the curtain on her feelings as obviously as the others do in the workroom. Notwithstanding this, her inner voice remains audible through her momentary expression, physical or mental. Each time I observe her, especially when I do so attentively, it seems that there is an invisible screen framing her every little movement. I feel that I am like an audience, gazing at a close-up scene while waiting for the actor's subtle expressive change, in an attempt to read her mind. But I know that this is a real live 'movie'. After several months living and working together, she has got used to me watching to her attentively. In fact, she also observes me, and sometimes she seems to know when I will take notes and when I might ask her the question, 'What do you think'. Quite often she tells me her opinions before I have asked her. She has got to know my note-taking habits very well, I guess.

At this moment, again, seeing me staring her at the face, she leans forward to me (we sit next to each other) and whispers in my ear to remind me to take a note (of the toilet blockage news).

'Have you written it down? You should. I know you will.' She says no more, but I

can tell from her facial expression that she has some more words inside her mouth.

‘What? Come on~~’ I insist, looking at her with a ‘ready to listen’ posture, waiting for her words. She finds that she cannot hold on to the words any more. She eventually lets them out:

*Remember last time when we had a meal together with Lao Li? I retain a clear memory of his complacency, while he pounded the table cheerfully when I told him about the smelly [angry] face of laoban (boss); [Do you] remember? And all agreed that it’s a good way to let him [the boss] know that we are human as well! ...*

‘We are human as well!’ I nod in agreement when I hear this.

Lao Li is a migrant worker from Sichuan Province. He worked in the Shunxin factory for less than two months from April to May in 2012. He left the factory because he was not happy with the boss. He complained about the low wages many times. On the night he left the factory-house, he blocked the toilet on the first floor.

Yang Cui gushes over, telling me about Lao Li, that he is now working in a spray-painting factory, and so on and so forth. While listening to her update on Lao Li’s recent status, I also listen with half an ear to the other surrounding sounds: cheerful voices fill the workroom. But, why do I also sense a tense atmosphere mixed with their joyfulness in the air? I ask myself.

My left hand keeps picking up the toy helicopters while my right hand keeps labelling them. Time passes while my hands move, automatically. One second. Another second. Another second. My thoughts move, consciously exploring.

What is the tenseness exactly? Where is it coming from? I feel that the joyfulness in the moment is mixed with seeming resentfulness, since the counterpart of their common-joyfulness is actually the boss’s anger. But, a resentful joyfulness? Isn’t that oxymoronic? The tense feeling that I can sense is tinged with the joyfulness. It is indistinct. As my wonder goes on, it seems that various potentially tense relationships in-between are emerging and they become clear in my mind.

In an ideal relationship, one can be scathing and funny to the other depending on the

situation; and one is not an avoider; one can express one's opposing opinion straightforwardly using words and face-to-face. That is to say, if there had been no tension in the power relationship between the local factory owner and the migrant workers, then the toilet-blockage 'violent protest' would not necessarily have been. If there had been no tension, the workers would not have needed to hold in their words and laughter until the boss had left, and they could have shared their banter with the boss without offending him. If there had been no tension, their gladness and gratification would not have been based on gloating over the boss's anger. If there had been no tension, the boss would not have become someone that was hateful and loathsome, as the common joyfulness tells me.

I stop my moving hands, trying to clear my mind.

### **Homeawayness: Physical closeness vs. conceptual barriers**

What makes the joyful moment shared by all the workers, regarding the toilet blockage news, are various juxtapositions. Firstly, the toilet blockage news serves as an exciting moment juxtaposed against the monotonous continuity of lived-in time in the assembly workroom. Secondly, there is the awareness of their hard working conditions as the workers juxtaposed against their imagination of a prodigal life that the factory boss and his family may have. And last but not least, their being migrants juxtaposes against those, like the boss and his family, who are 'the locals'. Although they did not block the toilet themselves, through their laughter, they momentarily express their common dissatisfaction towards Shunxin, who is a boss not a worker, a local not a migrant, rich not poor. Thus, he does not belong to 'us'. It is a moment when the workers consciously recognise themselves as not-locals, not-boss or not-rich by distinguishing themselves from their stereotype of Shunxin, such as being a local, a boss and rich. It is a 'moment of being' for them. Their common joyfulness momentarily shapes the invisible boundaries in their mind, between workers and bosses, migrants and locals, rich and poor, 'we' and 'you', self and others. To the workers, the boss becomes a certain stereotype: 'rich', 'arrogant local' and 'you the boss'. Working and living together in the same factory-house closely do not necessarily mean that is with more appreciation, agreement, acceptance, or tolerance between the workers and the boss. To the contrary, they seem to

imagine more difference because of the closeness, or even exaggerate the difference.

This is a paradox and there is irony. For work, for wages, for leaving home, for earning experience, for seeing the outside world, for children, for the future: each migrant worker has his or her own reasons to be here far away from home, working in a factory. They come from all over the country. Before they left their rural homes and migrated to work here, the workers did not know Shunxin and his family; broadly speaking, the migrants might not have known any local people here. To the migrants, the locals (like Shuxin) were strangers before they came here. As strangers, they were physically distanced and invisible. They were not really thinking too much about the difference between them—they are human beings as well—as strangers are not in their lives. When the strangers were not around them or did not have any engagement with them in their everyday life, there was no tension between them, or very little. But they have left home and moved here. Now in their lives, they live physically closer to the strangers—in this case, they are living within the same factory-house with the boss and his family, literally. However, leaving the hardship of their rural home, they are far from embarking on an easy road to prosperity, as they might have imagined, and settling down as they wished. The urban dream life seems to have more hardships than they imagined and the strangers (like the boss) seem to have become more different than they were in their imaginations. The workers are actually closer to the factory boss than when they were at home, but they imagine more difference and they exaggerate the difference when the boss becomes one of the local people around them. That is, their physical closeness with the strangers does not bring homogeneity; rather, they seem more aloof and emotionally isolated. The movement—in this case, they move from all over the country to the factory-house—brings the workers and the factory owner, the migrants and the locals, physically closer but, ironically, cognitively more distant. *The physical closeness with strangers that accompanies the conceptual barriers is, in other words, the migrants' homeawayness.*

I have introduced the idea of homeawayness in the last chapter (Chapter Three), where, through Yang Cui's littering moment, we have caught a glimpse on how a 'non-home' urban space is constructed functionally, aesthetically and morally by the floating migrant population who processed (or are possessed by) the sense of homeawayness. Here, the assembly workers' momentarily common joyfulness offers a glimpse into how the sense

of homeawayness combines the physical being-away-from-home with cognitive alienation from people in the ‘non-home’ urban space—the physical closeness with strangers that accompanies the conceptual barriers with them. Both of the physical and the cognitive aspects of homeawayness feature in the floating migrants’ experience of home with a detachment from their immediate environs, including people who are around.

Processed (or being possessed by) the sense of homeawayness, one does not experience home in the ‘presently here’; but one is not homeless; instead, home is ‘there’ and ‘then’ (in the past or in the future). Either from longing for the future or having nostalgia for the past, one seeks comfort of home in one’s imagination. Since one anchors oneself to an imaginary home, one thus cognitively detaches oneself from the real world around; that is, one remains a stranger to the world around.

### **Difference, distortion and discrimination**

The paradox of the physical closeness versus the conceptual barriers exists not just in a toy factory filled by fluidity of its workers but also on other scales, such as in the fast industrialising neighbourhood of Bomaqiao as a whole, also in urbanising China as a whole, even perhaps across Eurasia and along the Silk Road as such, all of which feature a large proportion of floating populations. Whether it is between one individual and another, between one group and another, or, between one ‘culture’ and another, the human fluidity seems to create more differentiation. Robert Paine (1992) explains this as what he calls ‘cultural compression’:

This means [...] that spatial nearness with temporal distance ferments the brew of communal strife. [...] It also means that experientially alive *boundaries* are, perhaps as never before, piled up spatially upon one another and around them are constructed—sometimes in haste, frequently with improvisation—ritual and residential, political and economic ‘fences’. (Paine 1992: 195)

But why? How? Do we set up an emotional barrier as the physical barrier has come down or has collapsed? Let us return to the assembly workers’ ‘joyful moment’ to examine it



closely.

It may be contended that in a power relationship, those who *place themselves* in the relatively weak position—such as a certain group of inward migrants as a minority compared to the locals as a majority<sup>55</sup>—are likely to be seeking homogeneity in order to strengthen ‘the self’ so that the ‘us’ can ‘fight’ better with the heterogeneous ‘others’. Specifically, in the case of the workers’ ‘joyful moments’, sharing the same conceptual boundaries, the workers temporarily *bind themselves* together in a relatively weak position within the power relationships between bosses and workers, locals and migrants, and rich and poor. To some degree, it is the ‘mental action’ of placing themselves in the relatively weak position that unifies them together, and manifests their common ‘joyfulness’ within the moment. What is the process of seeking homogeneity in a power relationship imbued by that tension? What consequences may it engender towards the understanding of the heterogeneous ‘others’?

Among a potentially homogeneous group, each individual may be rather different from the others. However, in a tense relationship, when one seeks for homogeneity, he or she tends to group together with the others who are potentially homogeneous by focussing on their ‘situational similarity’—whatever disadvantages, shortages or weaknesses that they feel they may all have in a specific situation, compared to the imaginary relatively superior heterogeneous ‘others’. The focus on the similarity therefore blurs their dissimilarity, and vice versa.

Meanwhile, another focussing-and-blurring towards the similarity and dissimilarity of the imaginary heterogeneous ‘others’ is also happening in parallel, yet in an opposite direction: focussing on the difference with their imaginary heterogeneous ‘others’ and thus blurring the similarity with them. That is, the differences (with their imaginary heterogeneous ‘others’) may not be as great as they imagine. Overemphasis on the differences (with their imaginary heterogeneous ‘others’) occurs because the focus (on

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<sup>55</sup> For example, ‘*laoxiang*’ (fellow villagers) is a term that shows us one kind of result of the ‘homogeneous’ seeking. The term is commonly used among the migrant factory workers here. Most of the time, it refers to the migrant workers in general, not specifically from the same village, the same town or the same province. Among the Chaoshan Nanyang migrants (like Zeng), for another example, the term ‘*gaginang*’ (our own people) also reflects the seeking of homogeneity among migrants. ‘*Gagi*’ means ‘one’s own’ in Chaoshan dialect, and ‘*ang*’ means ‘people’. As a term, it may refer to one’s family, one’s kin, one’s circle of friends or one’s acquaintances. But broadly, it is used by overseas Chaoshan people (Teochew) to express their feeling of affinity with each other as the same kind—they see each other as *gaginang*, one of us.

the difference) is at the cost of the blurring (of their similarity). *Distortion* towards the view of the heterogeneous ‘others’ therefore happens because of the overemphasis. In other words, the imaginary difference between the homogeneous and the heterogeneous is to some extent exaggerated. From this perspective, we may argue that, in a power relationship where there is tension, one’s seeking of homogeneity may engender distortion in viewing those designated as ‘others’, which comes out of the noise of one’s imagination—the imagination that, to some degree, exaggerates the difference between ‘the self’ and those formulated as ‘others’.

Moreover, the very seeking of homogeneity in order to ‘fight’ with the imaginary ‘others’ also implies seeing the differences (with the ‘others’) *as against the self* or *as threats*. One may see a possible ‘better me’ if one modestly perceives the difference with the others as a space for self-improvement. Conversely, one may see a ‘superior me’ if one arrogantly sees the difference as false or unbearable, or an ‘inferior me’ if one fearfully sees the difference as a threat. In the case of the ‘joyful moment’ in the toy factory, facing the differences with the imaginary boss, the workers momentarily make themselves inferior—in a relatively weak position—regardless of whether that inferiority is actual, supposed or imagined. Their private sense of inferiority is then marked by their ‘aggressive behaviour’ as compensation—their ‘resentful joyfulness’ compared to the boss’s anger. By means of seeking homogeneity—those who may share the same sense of inferiority that is marked by ‘aggressive behaviour’, each of the workers makes a moral self-justification for his or her own ‘aggressive behaviour’. That is, one morally allows, agrees, or makes sense of one’s own aggressive behaviours because he or she is not the only one but is one among others who are homogeneous and exhibit the same behaviours. In this sense, it is the imagined commonality that makes the workers’ ‘resentful joyfulness’ morally acceptable among themselves, so as to group them together within the moment. Through self-justification, each of them normalises their aggressive behaviour and simultaneously ‘demonises’ the formulated heterogeneous boss.

Within their joyful emotional moment, Shuxin is ‘demonised’ and labelled as certain kinds of person: a rich-local-boss, while his vividness, the mysteries and contingencies of his life, is deadly flattened into the a few words. In addition, the moment offers a glimpse into how a group of people (the migrant workers, in this case) protect their identities by

seeking homogeneity and excluding heterogeneity. That is, the moment hints at the danger of seeing differences as threats (or false, or intolerable) not only on the scale of individual but also on the scale of societies. By borrowing Jackson's words to reveal the point: 'as long as we regard ourselves as isolated and unique we risk throwing up stereotypes of the other that bear no relation to reality' (Jackson 2007: 231). '[I]n the same way that societies protect their identities and territories by excluding persons and proclivities that are perceived as threats, so discursive regimes seek definition by discounting experiences that allegedly lie outside their purview' (Jackson 2012: 3).

On the societal scale, the 'demonisation' of certain social groups manifests itself as discrimination. It is not unusual for us to distinguish ourselves from others, such as the locals versus the migrants, the east versus the west, the blacks versus the whites, the Christians versus the non-Christians, and many other dichotomies. But seeing others through the lens of self-arrogance or self-inferiority would engender distortion towards images of the so-called 'others'. Discrimination arises when ideational distortion is expressed behaviourally, and so brings the hidden tension to the surface. Thus, the issue of discrimination—no matter whether it relates to racism, sexism, classism, anti-Semitism, homosexuality, ableism or ageism, just to name a few—is about how one deals with the difference with the formulated 'others'. It shapes the surface of a tension. Beneath this surface, as I have argued, is hidden the inner self-negotiation: one makes a moral self-justification for one's own aggressive discriminatory behaviour towards the formulated 'others'.

As one moves, one's personal and social boundaries shift. The movement involves a shift from one circumstance of being to another for a migrant, and thus it brings about a process of self-reconstruction or re-imagination. Moving away from home brings not only newness and opportunities into one's life but also strangers, uncertainty and contrary views. If one can embrace differences among people, uncertainty can become potential opportunities, opposing views can feed one's open mind and dissenters do not weaken the 'self' but strengthen it. Contrarily, if one cannot embrace differences, strangers, uncertainty and opposed views will remain false, unbearable or threatening. This could partly explain why discrimination occurs more often and more seriously in a social milieu that has more human fluidity, where people have more chance to encounter strangers,

uncertainty and contrary views. This then brings us back to the paradox of physical closeness versus conceptual barriers and its wider application beyond the factory-house setting: the more human fluidity there is in a social milieu, the more obvious the isolation and differentiation there may be between individuals, groups or ‘cultures’.

### **Concluding remarks**

In terms of what I have discussed so far regarding difference, distortion and discrimination by using the case of the ‘joyful moment’, there are a few points that I would like to clarify or highlight briefly:

#### **I. Migration not only brings strangers into migrants’ lives but also into the locals’**

Over the course of analysing the ‘joyful moment’, I have paid more attention to migrant workers’ perspectives towards the tense relationship with the boss. But this does not necessarily mean that the boss, as a local, does not have his own feelings about the tension. Two sets of feelings are needed to shape tension. Migration brings newness, opportunities, uncertainty and strangers into the migrants’ lives but also into the locals’ lives. To most Chaoshan locals, on the one hand, the inward migrants provide them with a sufficient labour force for the fast-growing manufacturing in the region; on the other hand, the migrants are often perceived as potential troublemakers that can cause stress or conflicts. As I have mentioned in Chapter One, the local insulting term ‘*Ghuasengian*’ (used to refer to migrant workers from other provinces in China) tells us that migrant workers are not appreciated in general in the local world. Also, local Chen Ba’s statement ‘only *ghuasengian* walk’ shows us how he fills the empty space in his knowledge of *ghuasengian*—to him, they are strangers—with the noise of his imagination. That is, migration not only brings strangers into migrants’ lives but also into the locals’.

#### **II. Difference as a ‘poetic space’**

As I have addressed above, differences with others do not necessarily bring distortion and discrimination towards the others. Among the migrants I worked with, not everyone tended to see the difference with the boss or the locals as a threat. Xiao Bin, one of the assembly workers, was an example. To Xiao Bin, the difference with the boss was not considered as a threat but served as a kind of ‘poetic space’ for her to imagine her future and to express her dream life, as she told me once:

*Walking out to the outside world to search for a better life, that's all I want. I see my future when I see their (Shuxin boss and his family's) life. He is a smart and hard-working person. The other night I heard him arguing with someone over a phone call, fighting for a potential order, when I walked Xiao Qing back (to the factory-house) at midnight. ...He seems to be always busy, dealing with things that are a lot more important than what we do.*

She sees herself reflexively through seeing the differences with the boss. The difference affords a certain distance for her to see herself inwardly—the distance between her reality and an ideal self: not just as an assembly worker for her whole life but to become as successful as the boss who has his own business. One's life calls for a poetic aspect beyond the ‘present-here’—future or further, or using Xiao Bin's phrase, ‘*mingtian*’ (tomorrow) or ‘*waimian de shijie*’ (the outside world)—especially when the reality is unsatisfactory. That is, for some people, like Xiao Bin, the difference with others can instead afford a ‘poetic space’ for one's self-negotiation between the self in reality and an ideal self in one's imagination—a space for one to express, to imagine, to create, to change into a ‘better me’.

### **III. Homeawayness as a floating mind-set**

Accommodating the paradox of physical closeness with strangers and its corresponding conceptual barriers towards strangers, homeawayness as a kind

of floating mind-set thus brings us to the very interface of one's self and 'others', of one's reality and one's imagination, of one's past and one's future, and of one's rootedness and one's cosmopolitan openness. Having a rooted home somewhere else (whether concrete or imagined) while having one's everyday life uprooted from that home, the absence of home defines the floating mind-set of homeawayness.

## Chapter Five

### Making Home, Knowing Self

#### *Camp in the 'Farmland Protection Zone'*



Surrounded by hundreds of toy factories, this is the only ‘farmland protection zone’ in Bomaqiao. I came to visit the farmland several times, usually during my lunch break in between my factory shifts. Strictly speaking, these were not proper ‘visits’ as I never really stepped in; I just stood at the boundary, gazing into the distance while imposing my idyllic nostalgia and sentimental imagination onto it—it is *the last small piece of green in Bomaqiao, the last pastoral voice and the last sentimental piece of nostalgia*. I only came to know who lived on this farmland when I followed my key informant Yang Cui for her fortune-telling visit there. From then, I started to try to really ‘step’ into its ‘inner life’ and understand its ‘existential conditions’—its unique everyday rhythm and its mission,



which holds hope and a future for the people who live there (a few migrant peasant workers and a fortune-teller) and those who visit (migrant workers who come to visit the fortune-teller to see their fate and their future).

With more and more visits to the farmland, I became familiar with the migrant peasant workers and the fortune-teller. I was even invited to be a bridesmaid and join a wedding celebration there. It was the wedding of the son of Lao Hun's (one of the peasant workers who worked in the spring onion field). The young couple, Lao Hun's son and daughter-in-law, both worked in a nearby toy factory. I also set up a tent outside the shanties overnight in order to interview (informally) the fortune-teller's visitors who usually came early at dawn. I was told by Mei Dajie (another peasant worker who worked in the field) that if I travelled from outside the farmland zone at dawn I might be robbed as the area was not considered safe in Bomaqiao. So I camped on the farming field overnight, waiting for the coming of dawn and the arrival of the fortune-teller's visitors, attempting to know their fate, life and future.

What interested me most about this fortune-telling site was not the art of fortune-telling (*suān míng*) or the authenticity of the fortune-teller, but the fact that most of the visitors were migrant workers. This triggered my fullest curiosity to explore why they came to visit and what sorts of particular concerns they had. Learning from hundreds of informal interviews, what most surprised me was that beneath the surface of the various concerns they mentioned—such as changing jobs (factories), their children's education, marriage problems, and even gambling bets—lay a similar sense of being-in-the-world: being *homeaway*. The oxymoronic expression of their lives—leaving home in order to make a home—mainly shaped their inner concern about their fate and their future.

In this chapter, the first section will explore how a migrant lives a life and makes a home with two kinds of distance, spatial and temporal, and in turn, how such a life is 'woven' into the particular 'texture' of being-in-the-world: homeawayness. With either spatial distance or temporal distance, home is elsewhere. Home becomes 'where the self is going' (Ahmed 1999: 331). In other words, to a migrant, home may not be only where he or she comes from but also where he or she is heading.

Nevertheless, having a direction for the future does not necessarily mean that there is no struggle in the present. In the second section of this chapter, I elaborate this point by

means of the example of Yang Cui, describing the occasions on which I followed her to visit a fortune-teller, followed her self-narration of her dream, and somehow managed to ‘follow’ her inner struggle to terminate the ‘viscous’ relationship that she had with Lao Bo. Along with the process of my understanding of Yang Cui and her inner world, I address how her inward speech served as self-knowledge in a process of coming-into-knowing who she was.

By doing so, I conclude this chapter with a section which highlights the significance of investigating individual *interiority*—‘an individual’s inner consciousness, the continual conversation one has with oneself’ (Rapport 2008: 330). I first discuss the relationships among individual interiority, self-contradiction and homeawayness. In particular, in Yang Cui’s case, I argue that her floating mind-set of homeawayness accommodated her inner self-contradictions in terms of making home away from home; while her making of a future home to some extent became an *existential strategy* for her to deal with the present self-contradictions of being *homeaway*. I then continue to use the example of Yang Cui to further illustrate how her interiority related to her self-making. Through scrutinising Yang Cui’s silent thoughts, the chaotic self-arguments beneath her orderly ‘social profile’, I attempt to examine the possibility of individual interiority being a kind of *pre-form* of certain socio-cultural creativity.

As for the farmland, before I really stepped into its ‘interior’ world, its surface had been framed by my idyllic nostalgia allied with similar dominant assumptions about what a ‘farmland protection zone’ should be. I only realised this when I tried to ‘listen’ to its ‘inner voice’. During the nights when I camped there on the field, the winter cold was enough to keep my mind fresh, awake and alert, critically, and reflexively, about my enagement with other migrants’ lives (in the sense that I myself am a migrant student from China in the United Kingdom). The farmland became a new ‘home’ for me, not in terms of the way it made me feel ‘homely’ in my fieldwork but in the sense that it afforded a new ‘vantage-point upon the world’ (Rapport and Dawson 1998: 9) for me to know myself better and to perceive myself, others and the world differently; that is, seeing others from their perspective by trying to ‘follow’ their interiority.

## **14. The Farmland**

### **Living Parallel-lives with Spatial and Temporal Distance**

It is a ‘farmland protection zone’. Within the zone, beyond farming, there are full lives, hope and a future for the people that live here. Surrounded by paddy, a section of the spring onion field is at the heart of the farmland zone. A dark stream heavily polluted by the nearby factory sewage crosses the spring onion field. At one corner of the spring onion field, next to the dark stream, are three shanties. Four current workers—Lao Long, Long Hun and a couple, Lao Mei and Mei Dajie—and one fortune-teller, Master He, live here. Lao Long, Long Hun, Lao Mei and Mei Dajie work full-time for the spring onion field owner (a Bomaqiao local). During harvest time, there are usually a few more part-time workers on the field. Near the shanties, a rickety bridge above the dark stream leads to Master He’s fortune-telling hut. Like a magnet, early each morning the fortune-telling hut attracts dozens of visitors (mainly migrant workers) who come to learn about their fate and their future.



**Figure 64 - Harvest in the spring onion field (Photograph by the author)**





**Figure 65 - Shanties next to the spring onion field (Photograph by the author)**



**Figure 66- Shanties next to the spring onion field (Photograph by the author)**





**Figure 67 - A rickety bridge above a polluted stream (Photograph by the author)**



**Figure 68 - The fortune-telling hut with visitors waiting outside (Photograph by the author)**

The fortune-telling hut has been in the farming field since 1997, Master He told me. Master He does not farm but he usually starts his work at the fortune-telling hut before dawn. He closes the hut before noon. Most visitors are migrant workers; they come to visit before their morning shifts. The busiest period of a day falls between 5-7am and there is often a long queue. 'No visiting for *laoxiang* (fellow villagers) in the afternoon', a note hanging outside the door of the hut informs. Master He explained to me that what he means by '*laoxiang*' includes all migrant workers, the non-locals. Sometimes Master He is invited by local Bomaqiao people to practice geomancy and select a site to build a factory.

Like Master He, Lao Long, Long Hun, Lao Mei and Mei Dajie are all in their 50s. To most of the migrant factory workers in Bomaqiao, they are the older generation. They had their peasant life in their home villages before moving here. What makes it different from their lives in the past is that now they have an income. Life on this farmland has an everyday rhythm that is distinct from that outside the zone in Bomaqiao. Compared to the working hours in a factory from 7:30am to 10:30pm, in the field the hours are far shorter. As Lao Long said, '*I am used to following the sun and the moon, my crops and my body*'. Life on this farmland, on the one hand, follows the everyday rhythm of a peasant life, similar to in the past. Living on this farmland away from their rural villages, on the other hand, makes it possible for them to envision a future life and to make an effort to get closer to that future.

### **Lao Long: Moving closer to his daughter**

It is before dawn. Cigarette in mouth, straw-hat on head, towel on shoulder and hoe in hand, the day starts for Lao Long in the spring onion field. Each time Lao Long lifts the hoe and releases it to remove weeds, it is steady and precise. He uses a yoke to carry buckets of water freely and proficiently. He waters the spring onions before sunrise. By sunrise, he has already taken two breaks. He tills the land by the sweat of his brow. The third break in the morning will be a long lunch break. The sun rises high and the temperature reaches about 35 degrees centigrade; he finishes his work of the morning shift before noon, and rests in the shade, usually together with Long Hun, Lao Mei and Mei Dajie. So far today, he has earned 30 *yuan*. He rests, chats, and has lunch. He usually



takes a nap before he carries on hoeing again, heading to the middle of the field. He then works for another two to three hours in the sun, depending on the growth phase of the spring onions as well as the weather. He then enjoys a couple of idle hours before sunset when he has his dinner. He earns another 30 *yuan* for his afternoon shift. He is, literally, a real ‘*non min gong*’ (peasant worker).



**Figure 69 - Lao Long (Photograph by the author)**

Lao Long has worked for the spring onion farm for over ten years. He came to Bomaqiao from rural Hubei because his daughter works in a factory in Bomaqiao. Being a peasant for most of his life, he prefers to farm, even though he might have earned more if he had worked in a factory. *‘I don’t like working in a factory because I don’t like the factory time; it’s their time’*, Lao Long once told me, *‘...but I also want to be close to my daughter. I am putting up a place (a ‘room’) here for her to stay once in a while’*.

Lao Long’s daughter works in a nearby toy factory and lives in the factory dormitory. Lao Long has been building an extra room for her to visit and hopes that she will stay overnight occasionally once he has finished it. I went looking for and collecting building materials with Lao Long. Each time he found something potentially useful, a happy smile appeared on his face, as if he had got a step closer to finishing the extension and his daughter could visit him sooner and stay overnight. It was very touching to see that smile



on his face, when he discovered a piece of discarded fence, a tarpaulin or a bamboo pole in a rubbish pile on a construction site.



**Figure 70 - Lao Long is building an extended room—digging a hole in order to place a bamboo pole into it**

**(Photograph by the author)**

### **Lao Mei and Mei Dajie: Living parallel-lives**

Mei Dajie and Lao Mei have lived on the farming field for eleven years since they left their village in Henan Province. They always try to save money; every penny they can put aside from their daily expenses. They have a daughter and a son. Their daughter is married. Their son is now at middle school in their village in Henan. Their son was in Bomaqiao with them until he reached primary school age. Due to his *agricultural hukou* (rural household registration) registered in their home village in Henan, he had to return to his village to attend school since he could not join the state-subsidized schools in Bomaqiao.

One day, I was in the kitchen with Mei Dajie, helping her make dumplings for dinner for everyone in the farming field.

**Shuhua:** How's the kitchen in your village home? Does it also have a noodle maker?

**Mei Dajie:** Yes, a new one... I bought it last time... My son loves my noodles. He always asks me to add some more green peppers to the noodle soup, and some more, and some more. Ha-ha... naughty boy...

She talked as if her son was with her in her everyday life.

**Shuhua:** Sounds delicious! Will you show me how to make it one day?

**Mei Dajie:** Tomorrow lunchtime, I'll make some (for you). It tastes better than what you get from markets, and you can save a lot [of money]... Egg noodle soup with sponge gourd. Maybe it'd been even better to have some green pepper!

She laughed. I guessed she was thinking about her 'naughty' son.

**Mei Dajie:** But here we have sponge gourd. We grow them.

She picked up a sponge gourd and continued.

**Mei Dajie:** So it is free. Like living here, there is no rent here. We are going to save more and build one more floor in the future, an extra floor for my son, his future, his wife... you know, for marriage, girls ask for a house, for money... They can have their own floor; Lao Mei and I will live on the ground floor...



Figure 71 - The kitchen in the field with the noodle maker (Photograph by the author)

Our conversation continued, but I found that whatever questions I asked her, her response always ended with something about her son in her home village and her future related to her son's future. In one respect, she was in the present *now* imagining the future *then*. There was a temporal distance between present and future divided by time. In her present everyday life, she has an extended life in their future. In another aspect, she is in one

place, *here* in Bomaqiao in the farming field, thinking about her parallel life in another place, *there*, where her house and her son are, in rural Henan. There is spatial distance between *here* and *there*. Her life reaches beyond her bodily habitat; she has an extended life in her hometown related to her son. Managing both the spatial distance and the temporal distance, she lives her parallel lives *here* and *there*, *now* and *then*.

### **Homeawayness: The spatial distance and the temporal distance away from home**

In her everyday life as a migrant in Bomaqiao, Mei Dajie has two kinds of distance separating her from home: space distance and temporal distance. Although usually Mei Dajie and Lao Mei only go back home once a year during the Chinese New Year, they know that they can make an urgent trip back home if they have to. As Mei Dajie told me, ‘*within two days we can reach home*’. For them, the spatial distance is not impossible to overcome. Overcoming the spatial distance enables them to envision their future life and thus, to some extent, gives them confidence to overcome the temporal distance. Furthermore, they can accumulate their savings together from their incomes, so they can imagine their future (or their son’s future), which helps them to overcome the spatial distance. It is the confidence and the capacity to envision these parallel-lives that play a crucial role in the possibility or endurability of their present life. Within the distance (both temporal and spatial), their visions of the two kinds of parallel realities—life in the distance and in the future—have been weaving the particular texture of their present being-in-the-world: homeawayness.

To Mei Dajie and Lao Mei, being away from home involves not only spatiality but also temporality. Home is *there* not *here*, while it is in the future and not at the present. Accompanying the movement of migration itself, spatial distance and temporal distance come to exist in a labour migrant’s everyday life—to leave home in order to make a better life in the future, to make a future home. Mei Dajie and her husband Lao Mei moved to Bomaqiao not because Bomaqiao offers ‘a better life’ but because they believe that it will give them a better life in the future. Everyone has a different notion of what a better life is. For Mei Dajie and Lao Mei, a better life does not take place *here* or *now*, but is in a different place where they are *not* and in the future where they are *not yet*.

In this sense, to ‘make a home’ becomes an everyday life-challenge of conquering the

two kinds of distance. As long as one manages to overcome the existence of these two kinds of distance, the remote (both spatial and temporal) home retains its power, since it tirelessly permeates their present everyday life of being away from that home. As a result, people continuously negotiate whether to buy some green peppers or just have the ‘free’ sponge gourd; whether to rent somewhere to stay or just live near the field for free; whether to make one more trip home at summer time or just wait until the Chinese New Year holiday so that they can save money from the extra home trip. At each moment they envision that future life *there* and it affects the way in which they live their present everyday life *here*.

Besides Mei Dajie and Lao Mei, other migrant workers whom I encountered during my fieldwork and my *qiaopi* archival research also to some extent articulated the same two kinds of distance away from home, albeit that the notion of home varied from one migrant to another. For example, in Zeng’s case (Chapter Two), writing *qiaopi* and sending remittances home became an existential strategy for him to try to overcome both the spatial distance and the temporal distance. No matter how much he wished to return home, he remained in Thailand in order to make a better life in the distance and in the future. But, when one is not able to overcome either distance any more, no matter the reasons, the understanding of ‘home’ becomes re-constructed. For Zeng, from the moment he made the decision to stop sending money back to his home in China, he stopped his effort to make a future for that home as well as lost the confidence to endure the spatial distance. Once again, we see how the spatial and temporal distance mutually reinforce and impact each other.

To take another example, Xiao Bin (Chapter Three), a young mother working in the Shunxin Factory, aimed to set up her own business (a small clothes shop) in Bomaqiao. She attempted to employ new technology such as a smart phone with a video-chat feature to help her overcome the spatial distance with her little son, whom she had left behind at her rural home. It was her vision of her future, her life-project building that fundamentally gave her the strength to conquer the present everyday life-challenge of being separated from her little son.

Nevertheless, life remains uncontrollable and uncertain for most of us. Not everyone has the confidence to overcome the two kinds of distance. One may not always be sure

about one's future; a future that is constantly constructed and re-constructed by the everyday life of being away from home. Yang Cui, another key informant in my fieldwork, chose to visit a fortune-teller to ask about her future and to get help to make a decision. In fact, it was Yang Cui who brought me into the fascinating lives of this farm-field, and allowed me to step into the rich interiority of a human being: her dream and her inner world, which will be elaborated in the following section of this chapter.

## 15. Narrating a Dream, Struggling to Know Oneself

### A dream, a self-narration

**Yang Cui:** ‘...I had a dream last night. It tells me about the real me, the one that is actually struggling internally all the time in every minute, every second, even at night after I fall asleep. See, even in my dream.’

**Yang Cui** [her voice becomes remorseful, mixed with poignancy]: ‘How can I keep failing again and again? Each time I promised myself that it would be the last time. I want him but I love my daughter more. I feel happy being together [with him] but also stressfully unhappy. I know we don’t have a future. I know! That’s why I need to end it now! Now! Now!’

**Yang Cui:** ‘I heard my inner voices in the dream. I think I will end it, for this time. I need to.’

Yang Cui is talking about her relationship with Lao Bo. It has been more than a month since Yang Cui decided to leave Lao Bo, once again. In the past few years, she made the same decision several times, but every time they ended up being together again. They are not married. Lao Bo has his wife and two children back home in rural Sichuan. Yang Cui has a ‘left-behind’ daughter in her rural home as well (Yang Cui avoids mentioning her husband).

We are crouching while queuing for fortune-telling outside the fortune-telling lodge. She is talking while absent-mindedly pulling weeds from the ground around her.

**Yang Cui:** ‘The dream couldn’t be more real if it happened in reality.’

**Yang Cui** [sentimentally]: ‘His face is so clear in the dream, his voice is so much his, his love to me and his helplessness on his face when he saw me... Everything! Everything is so real. In the dream, I thought that I was in reality, although the setting in the dream was a strange place that I was not familiar with.’

**Yang Cui:** ‘It [the dream] took place in the evening after work. I was alone in a very spacious canteen. Without thinking, I made a call to him, after one long month. Without thinking, I told him that I was in the canteen, alone there, about to eat dinner. As soon as I hung up the call, I immediately regretted it. I knew that he would come to see me soon. I hated myself for failing [to leave Lao Bo] again.’

**Yang Cui:** ‘I then finished my food. I locked the door of the canteen, and stepped out onto the street. I knew he must have been somewhere around already. I looked around, expecting him to appear, standing somewhere not far away. I didn’t see him. I put my head down, and momentarily felt relaxed but also disappointed. Right at that moment, I saw him, inside a new white car, waiting for me with his smile that I am so familiar with.’

**Yang Cui** [taking to herself]: ‘Oh, maybe he got a car during that month?’

**Yang Cui:** ‘I re-assured myself, as he had told me before that we would have a car in the future.’



**Yang Cui:** ‘But suddenly I felt that I wanted to escape from his sight, simply because I was not dressed well.’

**Yang Cui** [becoming agitated]: ‘My face must have been so pale due to this whole month’s sleeplessness; my hair must have smelled so bad because I had not washed it for a few days; and how could I see him in this top, my last choice of what I would wear to see him.’

**Yang Cui** [anxiously while becoming woeful]: ‘I didn’t want him to see me like that, although I missed him so much...so much...so much.’

Yang Cui is sobbing. I pass her a facial tissue. She stops for a few seconds, sobbing and cleaning her running nose, and continues:

**Yang Cui:** ‘I ran away, as fast as I could, and my hands were holding a pillow and a duvet; strange, isn’t it? I had been holding them since I left the canteen. They made my running difficult. The street-lights were rather dim. I needed to hold them either on the left or on the right side, not in the middle, to be able to see the path in front of me. I wanted so much to throw them away so that I could run faster. But in the dream, they seemed very important to me and I could not do that. Simultaneously, I also did not want him to see me holding that stuff. I needed to be perfect in front of him, not like that.’

**Yang Cui:** ‘I kept running along a street. His car seemed to be getting closer and closer. I was more and more nervous. I kept running. I saw the sign for the public toilet, and

passed a few alleyways. I didn't stop and my mind was busy too.'

**Yang Cui** [hesitantly]: 'Maybe I should hide in the public toilet? No, no, no. Not wise at all. He must be very close to me now. He would see me slipping into the toilet. What an indecent place to hide! I'd better turn into an alleyway, and then turn again, so that he will have to get out of his car in order to follow me, but by the time I have made some more turns into some other alleyways eventually he will lose me. Good heaven!!! It is too late to do it now. I've already passed the alleyways quite a while ago.'

**Yang Cui**: 'Then, luckily, there was a crowd of children, celebrating something in the middle of the street. I managed to pass them but I knew that it wouldn't be easy for him driving in his car. I got a chance to slow down a little bit, and breathe at the end of the street. But, I hit a T-junction.'

**Yang Cui** [tensely and apprehensively]: 'Oh no, no, no! Which one should I take, left or right? Both directions are new to me. I have no idea about them at all. How can I choose?'

She stops pulling the weeds for a while. She looks at me, and continues:

**Yang Cui**: 'I just found that I might not have time to think too much. So I just turned left without any reason, and kept running. The more I ran, the more I felt that I needed to keep running.'

**Yang Cui** [reflectively]: ‘I could not just give up and stop, otherwise we would meet again, and even worse, he would see the worst “me” ever...’

**Yang Cui:** ‘I kept running along the road. But the road seemed endless. It was scarily quiet and straight and for a long time I saw no end in front of me. What’s worse, along the road on the left hand side was a high stone-built wall, I felt its great pressure when I ran all the way along next to it. All of these, so strange, right? Last week, you told me that in the place where you study there were pretty high stone-built walls. See. They appeared in my dream.’

**Yang Cui:** ‘I kept on running. I became more and more tired and my legs seemed heavier and heavier. I wanted to speed up but I couldn’t. I felt almost breathless. I kept running while occasionally turning my head back to look at his approaching car.’

**Yang Cui** [extremely nervously]: ‘Oh no! His car’s coming. I need to speed up! I shouldn’t stop. I shouldn’t give up. Where is he? He must be so close to me now...Oh, how can I do it? Oh, no, he’s almost reached me!’

**Yang Cui:** ‘But my mind couldn’t make my legs go faster. His car was getting so close to me already. I was about to give up.’

**Yang Cui:** ‘No! I shouldn’t stop. I shouldn’t give up... But he’s almost reached me! Oh no! Oh no! Oh no!!!’

**Yang Cui:** ‘Then I woke up, at that very point! I looked through the dark in my room, wondering whether in my dream he had caught me in the end. I had no answer, but felt so so so tired...’

I am listening quietly, without interrupting Yang Cui, as if I am watching her film—entitled ‘A Dream? A Runaway?’—with her narration. My face is covered with tears, and so is hers.

Yang Cui is narrating her dream, and her life. She is the leading actress of her own story. She acts in her waking life but also in her dream. Her experience of reality is presented as being dynamically co-created out of both her everyday life as well as her experience of dreaming in its powerful ‘evocative form’ (Edgar 2002: 79). She seems to know what decision she wants to make; but she also seems to struggle a lot with her decision. She is talking to me but also to herself, trying to understand her own mind through the dream but also through the talking itself.

As her narration goes on, through her memory Yang Cui’s mind is constructing the dream imagery and her feelings in the dream again. In this sense, her narration of the dream is like a dreaming of the dream again in her waking time. That is, the narration, like a re-dreaming, is a revisit of her ‘currency of consciousness’ (Steiner, cited in Rapport 2008: 346) during the dream and, simultaneously portrays that consciousness. In exploring dreaming as ethnographic research, Iain Edgar (2004: 44) suggests that one can, to some extent, narrate one’s own dreams because they appear as ‘narratively delineated image[s]’. He argues that our dreams present us with the most original array of inner imagery because we experience the image in its ‘purest, least egoistical form in the dream and possibly in vision’ (ibid.: 42-45). Concurring with Edgar’s point on the originality and pureness of the form of dreams, I would even compare dreaming to the creation of fiction. If ‘fiction might be said to be “truer” than social science in its efforts and intent to deal with how individual consciousness feels in the everyday and is immanent in social life’ (Rapport 2008: 330), then dreams might be said to be ‘truer’ than fiction in its ‘wilder’ and more ‘unscrupulous’ expression of those feelings through more fanciful plots, because no readership-concern is involved in their creation. Dreams might be one

of the most intimate individual creations that can touch the wildest reaches of our humanity, the parts that cannot find ways to be expressed in one's waking reality. Dreaming is one's own 'writing' directly inscribed on one's consciousness. It does not even need any instruments like pens or paper, and there are no expected external readers to restrict its creation. It is *self-informed* and *self-informing*. 'It (the dream) tells me about the real me', as Yang Cui said.

I am reporting diligently, trying not to have too much interpretation of her dream.<sup>56</sup> It is a story in itself. It is a rich dream in itself. Her narration is a 'thick description' (Geertz 1973) in itself. She is narrating her dream. She is also writing my ethnography.

Yang Cui directs her own story. But it is still an open story that needs an ending. She has come here to the fortune-teller to ask about her fate, about the possible ending of her story. She is queuing patiently, in order to find out about her future.

### **Using the power of dream: The dream as a message from *Laotian* (heaven)**

We have been queuing for more than an hour. The weeds surrounding Yang Cui have almost been pulled out. That is the fate of those weeds. How about Yang Cui's fate? It is her turn now. Unfortunately, I am not allowed to go into the fortune-telling lodge with her. So I use the time to remember her narration of the dream and to write it down in my notebook while waiting outside the lodge. After approximately fifteen minutes, she steps out from the lodge. 'So?' I ask, with sincere concern. Yang Cui looks at me and says, 'I knew it must be a call. It is! *Laotian* (heaven) does not allow me to be with him.' She says nothing more, heading towards my motorcycle (we came together on my motorcycle). I get on the motorcycle, start the engine and she gets on. We leave. I dare not say anything, to avoid annoying or upsetting her.

It is a call from *Laotian*—Yang Cui reassures herself through the fortune-teller that her dream is a message from *Laotian*, which indicates that she should stop her relationship with Lao Bo. *Laotian*, or *Laotianye* (heaven lord, literally meaning 'old man in the sky'), a term commonly used among Chinese, broadly refers to heaven as the

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<sup>56</sup> To some degree, the dream brings up some classical dream imagery and possible interpretations linking to different aspects of consciousness: such as, a white new car—the material lives of Yang Cui and Lao Bo in the future, or their life goal; A crowd of children in the middle of the street—Yang Cui's daughter as her future, helps her focus; A T-junction, the choice of two directions—to be or not to be with Lao Bo; A stone wall—a different life, and so on.

highest ‘authority’, which has the magic power to control everything about the human world on the earth: for instance, to punish moral faults or evil behaviours and to reward virtuous ones. In regard to the moral determinism of Chinese philosophical discourse, as it relates to the power of *Laotian*, Wing-tsit Chan (1963: 78-79, cited in Sangren 2012: 119) sums it up: ‘[h]eaven always encourages virtue and punishes evil; therefore, man can determine his reward and punishment through moral deeds’.

However, Stafford (2012: 99) points out that ethnographic evidence suggests that ‘Chinese people are not generally fatalistic in any simple sense’. On the one hand, *Laotian* is not a specific religion and does not refer to any specific gods. In order to follow the visit to the fortune-teller and to interpret her dream as a kind of message from *Laotian*, Yang Cui does not necessarily need to follow a specific religion; many Chinese people do not belong to a specific religion. On the other hand, *Laotian* plays an important role as an invisible ‘authority’ to many Chinese people (whether they follow a specific religion or not), especially when one uses the authority voice to reassure one’s self-doubt, or as self-evidence for self-mastery. As Sangren (2012: 117) concludes in his study of the Chinese idea of fate: ‘[b]eneath the wish to control the future, whose rationale is apparently self-evident, lies a psychologically more fundamental desire to claim ownership of one’s being—or, in contemporary parlance, to assert agency’.

On the way back to the factory, we stop at the local food market and buy two small bags of soymilk and two twisted crullers as our breakfast. It is only 6:42am, still a bit too early to go to work. We come back to the courtyard-house. I park my motorbike in the courtyard and lock it. We sit down on the courtyard curb. I pass Yang Cui a bag of soymilk and a twisted cruller.

**Shuhua:** It is getting cold; let’s eat it.

**Yang Cui:** You say, who doesn’t want to be loved? Right?

**Shuhua:** Oh... Yeah.

**Yang Cui:** And he is so nice to me. What’s more, we are human beings.

Yang Cui bites her twisted cruller, and continues:

**Yang Cui:** Human beings are supposed to have a live-life; we are not donkeys! [see Chapter Four]. Work hard in order to save money. But we also need to have a live-life as well.

She looks at me.

**Yang Cui:** You know.

I can tell from her eyes how much she wishes to mention Lao Bo again, but ironically, she seems not to do so on a second thought. She stops for a while and continues:

**Yang Cui:** Leaving home and earning money are things I have to do, for Xiao Ai's [her daughter's] future. I owe her so much. You know, when she goes to a university in a city, I will move to work there, wherever she is. Then I can take care of her well. We will be together!

She finishes the sentence with an exclamatory pitch. Through a plastic straw, she drinks the bag of soymilk in one big sip. She holds her breath for a while before letting out a sigh of relief, as if she has overcome all the toughness in life and eventually achieved something she wants. She soon looks at the sky while a flock of pigeons fly in the air, as if she sees her future life, living together with her daughter.

**Yang Cui:** Anyway, the dream determines my decision. And that's good; at least I will feel at ease if I go home next month [for the Chinese New Year] and spend time with my girl.

She seems to have strengthened her will again by virtue of the power of the dream, and of *Laotian*. From such a message, from the 'authority' of *Laotian*, she gains reassurance about her decision to stop the relationship with Lao Bo. She gains strength to move on without Lao Bo.

We walk slowly to the factory. We are still a bit early. Only Yang Cui and I are here in the workroom. It is rather quiet and we faintly hear some arguments from the top floor, which is occupied by the factory boss and his family.

**Yang Cui:** Sometimes, I can't understand why she (the boss's wife) is so quarrelsome. Shopping, drinking tea, picking up kids and worshipping gods: what else does she need to do in her days? No, she doesn't need to work. And she is around her family, her kids, and her husband. She should be content with her lot in life! Why bother so much? Why argue so much? Why? ...

Yang Cui is nagging while dragging a big basket full of half-made toys to her assembly spot. She sits down. She rests her chin on her left hand, while the middle finger of her right hand touches the screen of her smart-phone. She seems to have no intention



of starting work.

**Yang Cui:** You know, I deleted his (Lao Bo's) number in my phone, but I can't delete my memory. I still remember it. I cannot forget it. But it is useless. I can't call him. Even *Laotian* (heaven) will not allow me to be with him. I shouldn't call him. I shouldn't. I know we don't have a future. No...

Some music plays from her smart-phone; it sounds familiar to me.

**Yang Cui:** I like this song the most.

**Shuhua:** What song is it? I guess I've heard it before; the melody sounds familiar to me.

**Yang Cui:** He told me that the title is 'Getting warm'. I like it. It reminds me of our [Yang Cui and Lao Bo] first meeting. The first time I met him, his mobile phone was playing this song. He is different. He is unique. He is romantic...

The song is playing, repeatedly:

*We hug thus we are getting warm*

*We lean on each other, thus we survive*

*Even though in the freezing human world we lose our identities.*

*Even though we are sinking among a huge crowd of people.*

*Don't conceal your loneliness*

*Despite the world being more brutal than what we imagine.*

*I won't close my lonely eyes*

*Just because I love to see your innocence.*

...

**Shuhua:** I really like the lyrics.

**Yang Cui:** You know...he made me warm...at night...on many nights...

Her voice is so quiet that I can only figure out some words from the movement of her mouth.

**Yang Cui:** But I need to stop it.

She suddenly stops playing the song.

**Yang Cui:** Otherwise, *Laotianye* (heaven lord, usually synonymous to the meaning of *Laotian*) will be angry at me, and will punish me.

It seems that she stopped the music at the right time. Liu Jie and then a few other workers come into the workroom. It must be about 7:30am. Very soon, the workroom becomes busy. For most of the morning shift, Yang Cui seems distraught.

I leave the workroom early, before 11:30am, and go back to the courtyard-house to cook lunch for Yang Cui (I told her in the morning that I would cook a delicious and spicy meal for her for lunch, to cheer her up). She comes back to the courtyard-house in time for lunch. She mentions again a couple of details that appeared in her dream—the pillow and duvet, the T-junction, and the crowd of children in the middle of the street, each holding a colourful balloon. Over lunch, we discuss those seemingly strange details that appeared in her dream. We finish our lunch with Yang Cui repeating her ‘self-reminder’: *‘I need to stop it, otherwise, Laotian will be angry at me and will punish me.’*

Two days later (after Yang Cui told me her dream), she buys me ice cream after our lunch in the nearby Sichuan-flavour eatery. Walking back to the ShunXin Factory, she explains why she bought me ice cream and she talks about the dream again:

*I think you are right; maybe the pillow and the duvet are about our material life. We need them to keep warm, to survive. I agree with you that material life may not be the centre of our life even though we need them to survive. Like in the dream, when I hold them in front of me, they block my view of the path forward. ... I was thinking of him last night, and about the dream. I couldn't sleep. I was thinking: if I threw away the pillow and the duvet, then nothing would block my view of the path in front of me, so I might run faster... He just spoiled me with his everything! He is romantic. ... I was with him because of the feeling, the feeling he gave me, the feeling that you felt if you were someone's princess. The feeling was so nice but so unreal too. It is rather illusory. I know we don't have a future. In fact, I even know that I just pretended... I forgot the reality, the fact that he has his wife and children. I am not his princess. No. ... Even worse, the more I enjoyed being a princess, the more I felt that I was evil, so*

*anomalous, you know; particularly at some moments, when I suddenly and oddly thought about my girl while I was with him. And, you know, I hate my girl's [Yang Cui's daughter's] heartless dad.*

She walks slowly and talks with a low voice. We then turn into the busy main road. Her quiet voice is immediately overpowered by the traffic noise. It becomes difficult for me to hear her. But she continues to talk at the same volume:

*So that I don't want him (Lao Bo) to be a bad father... You know, I bought two dresses last year, one for my girl and one for his [Lao Bo's youngest daughter]... He said that they are the same age... I saw their [Lao Bo's wife and children] photos once... Too painful! Especially the woman [Lao Bo's wife]. But I don't want to see them anymore... She appeared in my dream. She angrily pushed the door open when we were in our room, and I woke up, feeling really bad and guilty... I have never met her but she was in my dream... Now I have left him but he appears in my dream.*

Suddenly, she stops speaking and walking.

**Shuhua:** Are you okay? Would you like some water? ... What did the fortune-teller say about the dream?

I eventually find a good chance to ask this question. I have been wanting so much to know what happened in the lodge and what messages she was given by the fortune-teller. Yang Cui starts walking again while answering my question:

*I can't really understand what the master said. So I asked him to confirm whether he meant that I should stop the relationship with A Bo [Yang Cui sometimes also called Lao Bo 'A Bo']. And the master responded to me with a brief and neat 'Yes'. What else? Um... What else did the master say? Actually, I can't remember what exactly he said. Oh, he mentioned that I would receive unexpected help from someone from the North; and also reminded me that I may have trouble in late March next year; I need to*

*pay special attention to everything next March; and some other words that I couldn't understand and I can't remember.... Oh, you know, Laotian was angry at me. I received triple nubei (angry answer)<sup>57</sup>. I need to stop it; it won't lead me to a good future, a home. I was thinking of my girl when I was in the lodge... I put twenty yuan in the donation box<sup>58</sup> as xiangyouqian [literally 'incense and oil money'] and came out.*

### **Inward speech: Self-knowledge as a process of coming-into-being**

(L)anguage itself creates a screen between reality and human presences, and when it is inner, it also allows roaming thoughts out of step with the present concerns of the interaction. (Piette 2016: 16)

Yang Cui talks in a low voice, as if it is more about speaking to herself than to me. She walks at a slow pace as if it is the pace of her self-awareness of her interior world. Every slow step she makes is like a step in the direction of making sense of herself. For me, I feel that our physical movement is too slow. On several occasions, my mind wanders away from following the movement of her consciousness and becomes sensitive to the

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<sup>57</sup> I spoke to Master He (the fortune-teller) later on; he explained that *nubei* (literally 'angry answer') is one of the three common results of conducting a *jiaobei* divination. *Jiaobei* are two pieces of wooden blocks in pairs, each shaped like a moon crescent; *jiaobei* blocks are also called moon blocks. A piece of *jiaobei* has two different sides: the bulged side is *yin* (negative side) and the flat side is *yang* (positive side). To seek an answer to certain mundane affairs from any specific gods, one's ancestors, or in general from *Laotian*, one holds a pair of *jiaobei* between one's palms, kneeling in front of a shrine, and poses the question in a quiet voice or in silence to the deity, and then throws the *jiaobei* to the floor. The different patterns of the *jiaobei*'s position on the floor indicate different answers provided by the deity: if one piece lands with the side of *yin* facing upwards and the other piece lands with the side of *yang* facing upwards, this is called '*shengbei*'—a divine 'yes'; if both pieces show the *yang* side facing upwards, it means '*xiaobei*'—a laughing answer, which means no clear reply is given because, according to the deity, it is not yet the right time to ask such a question or the question itself is not really a question to the worshiper so no answer needs to be provided. The third possible landing pattern is both blocks with the *yin* sides facing upwards, which is called '*nubei*'—a native (angry) answer indicating a clear 'no' as the reply. Commonly, worshipers repeat the *jiaobei* divination (the throwing) three times. The triple *nubei* that Yang Cui received is thought to be a very clear negative answer as it shows the deity's or *Laotian*'s anger with the question asked again and again. *Jiaobei* divination is widely used in the Chaoshan region but also in some other regions in Guangdong and Fujian provinces, as well as in Taiwan in the Chinese folk religion. The fortune-teller once told me that he had not previously provided *jiaobei* divination in his lodge but some local Chaoshan people asked for it, so he introduced it about a year after he moved to Shantou from Henan province in 1997.

<sup>58</sup> It is donation for the purchase of incense and oil as offerings to the deity. The fortune-teller does not require fees but suggests contributing money for the purchase of incense and oil.

noise, the air and the rubbish around. I am walking next to Yang Cui and it takes more than half of the way (from the lunch eatery to the factory) for the pace of my mind to match the slow speed of our walk.

In fact, it took me a lot more time to adapt to Yang Cui's inner pace. It was almost the whole year from the beginning of my fieldwork to the moment when I eventually saw her invisible inner fighting scenes, heard her inaudible inner argument, and most crucially, sentimentally felt her inner pain. It had been a slow process whereby Yang Cui opened herself to others, to me. For almost a year, she had been hesitating about sharing her inner pain with me. I occasionally sensed her sadness but I could only guess why. As our relationship grew, she gradually opened up to me (especially since she found out that Lao Bo had told me their secret—they were not a married couple—and each of them had their own family). She started sharing her feelings, her inner struggle with me after that. To Yang Cui, I had increasingly become a good listener and a special friend, but I was also a stranger with the label 'anthropologist' who would leave sooner or later when the fieldwork was done, go back to remote Scotland and disappear from her life. Our 'intimate ties' (Berliner 2016: 5) and 'empathic connections' (Edgar 2004: 44) had built up with patience and understanding throughout my ethnographic fieldwork.

As for Yang Cui's previous partner, I never find out what happened to their relationship. And Yang Cui never wants to mention it. Are they married? Are they divorced? Are they separated? Why? How? When? I have no idea at all. It is her secret. But important questions remain: what did that silence really mean to Yang Cui? Was the silence also a way for her to make a life for herself? Or was the silence her way of expressing her feelings about that relationship? Could narration re-create moments that Yang Cui would not want to experience again? Was it because words can be lifeless (Das 2006) that Yang Cui chose not to say them? Or was her relationship with Lao Bo a kind of healing (ibid.) of a painfully silent past? It may be a void area to others but it must be a rich (although maybe filled with pain) part of her interior world. Just as her secret relationship with Lao Bo, the silence about the past shapes her present life and her future, deep in her own 'interiority' (Rapport 2008). In short, 'it is perhaps in silence—not claiming to communicate—that, paradoxically, we are most expressive' (Woolf 1981: 159-160, cited in Rapport 2008: 334).

I walk cautiously and listen meticulously. I carefully pick out clean spots without rubbish to take a step while attentively following Yang Cui's moving consciousness. My mind switches between the rubbish-covered pathway and Yang Cui's interior world, which is filled with self-contradictions. Used plastic bags, instant noodle containers, disposable foam food-boxes, cigarette butts, candy wrappers and boiler slag mixed with various others waste paves the path in front of us. 'A Bo', 'my girl', 'a home', loneliness mixed with grievance, affections, desires and moral restriction fill Yang Cui's interior world with ambiguousness and ambivalence, while the advice from the fortune-teller, the implication of the triple *nubei* ('angry answer') and the power of the dream as a message from *Laotian* (heaven) sheds light on the only way she believes will lead her to 'a good future'—the end of her relationship with Lao Bo. She believes that the dream delivered a clear message to her: it would be a failure if she were to date Lao Bo again. It would be against fate, the will of *Laotian*. She revisits her dream, again and again, in order to decode it and to make sense of her waking reality. She is using her dream in order to better organise her waking time: to gain power from *Laotian* and to support her shaky promises (to herself) in reality, to decide to stop her relationship with Lao Bo.

To Yang Cui, the relationship with Lao Bo was rather 'viscous'. On the one hand, Yang Cui did not feel morally right maintaining the relationship. When she was with Lao Bo, she felt guilt and danger due to Lao Bo's wife and children. She believed that an affair with a married man was an anomalous relationship. On the other hand, she enjoyed being spoiled 'like a princess' within the relationship, even though she believed that there was no future for the anomalous relationship. To define the anomalous, Mary Douglas (2011[1966]: 39) uses Sartre's (1943) essay on stickiness—the viscous substance somewhere between solid and liquid. 'The viscous...is unstable... Its stickiness is a trap... Stickiness is clinging, like a [...] mistress' (ibid.). The anomalous relationship that Yang Cui and Lao Bo had was, as Yang Cui told me, indeed ambiguous and viscous. It was something between marriage and friendship. Moreover, being in a 'viscous' relationship can be risky because the viscous attacks the boundary between oneself and the viscosity; one remains solid to plunge into water but to touch stickiness is to risk diluting oneself into viscosity (ibid.). The process of struggling to get out of her self-

indulgence within the ‘viscosity’ involved, in other words, Yang Cui’s constant attempts to work out who she was—a continual conversation she had with herself.

I listen intently and also imaginatively. I follow her as closely as possible, both physically and mentally, in order to capture the trace of her faint voice among the loud traffic noise (especially after we turned into the main road) and to try and hear her hidden vulnerable ‘interiority’—‘an individual’s inner consciousness, the continual conversation one has with oneself’ (Rapport 2008: 330)—beneath the apparent, tough ‘social crust’. Even surrounded by the busy traffic noise, I pay great attention to very subtle changes in her tone, as if those changes are ‘fragment[s] of an individual’s linguistic identity’ that ‘breach the surface of the self’ (ibid.: 333)—in this process the inner unvoiced discourse becomes audible. Like in the very first narration of her dream while we were waiting for the fortune-teller, she seems to be both talking to me and speaking inwardly to herself. Indeed, as she walks and talks, her mind detaches itself from the immediate environs—the loud traffic noise and the road surface that is full of rubbish, and the dusty and polluted air seem not to bother her at all. She is taking the opportunity with me (next to her) to have a conversation with herself. As she articulates her internal struggle and inconsistencies explicitly, her implicit feelings towards different parts of the self become clearer.

One may experience self-awareness either alone or in the midst of social interactions when one becomes conscious of one’s inconsistencies (Berliner 2016: 5). In the midst of social interactions, such as in a conversation, we speak to each other outwardly but we also speak inwardly and to ourselves (Steiner 1978, cited in Rapport 2008). We do not just say things that we already know in our minds or things we have planned to say, but the process of speaking out may also channel our unknown voices hidden from ourselves. As Lambek (2016: 8) puts it, ‘our worlds are varied and unpredictable enough to make us want to stay around, keep talking, and see where the conversation turns next’. Or, ‘perhaps when people talk aloud it is because their different selves are aware of disavowment and in need of communicating among themselves, settling a dispute; when this is established, they again fall silent’ (Woolf 1980, cited in Rapport 2008: 334).

In Yang Cui’s case, in order to work out who she is, she takes her steps slowly while the words keep coming out; she is thereby getting to hear her own voice from inside. Like



drawing, inward speech as another way of expression reliant on a creative process, and everything happens in the process of becoming. As one's imagination goes on, scenarios develop, feelings are sensed and thus self-knowing occurs; and possibly decisions are made. Yang Cui walks and talks while trying to hear her inner voice and get to know herself. That is, the walking knowledge that she receives from the taking of subsequent steps and the inward speech in which she argues with different parts of herself is her *self-knowledge*, her feeling about herself. It is intimate knowledge that is 'behind the scenes, behind the masks and roles, behind the generalities and abstracts' (Cohen and Rapport 1995: 9, cited in Edgar 2004: 44). Compared to that which one learns from the exterior world, self-knowledge is another kind of knowledge that is produced in the process of *coming-into-knowing* oneself.

To reiterate, Yang Cui speaks aloud trying to hear her own voice, in order to figure out who is she exactly. It is an argument that she is having internally. Two different parts of her are fighting: one part is attached to her daughter and the other part is attached to Lao Bo. I hear her 'roaming thoughts' (Piette 2016: 16) and see her 'internal speech-act' (Rapport 2008)—fighting scenes on the stage of her interior world. I saw similar fighting scenes when I was listening to her narration of the dream. It is as if I have watched a film, with her self-narration, which mainly focuses on her self-knowledge of feeling, love, home, hope, and future.

### ***Getting warm***

It is winter. Usually, it is not cold here, in a city intersected by the Tropic of Cancer. But it seems rather cold tonight. After the night shift, I feel weary and cold. Yang Cui sits on the edge of my bed (I have no chair in my room) and turns on her favourite song, *Getting warm*. I use my guitar-shaped bottle opener and open the two bottles of Tsingtao beer I bought on the way back to the courtyard-house. She bought me ice cream after lunch so I bought her a bottle of beer. We talk about the dream and others. I tell her the love story of my guitar-shaped bottle opener and why I have brought it with me everywhere over the last ten years. She teases me about my story as a childish game. We drink and we talk. We depict love, home, future, and hope, as if they are themes with warmth. But what if love is not within the everyday expression of life? What if home is too remote to warm

you up? What if the future is too far away to reach? And hope is too vague to envision? Our conversation moves from one theme to another but still feels cold, as the winter wind blows across our faces, and keeps bringing us back to the reality. For some moments, we stop our conversation. We just drink, temporarily losing ourselves in the melody of *Getting warm*:

*We hug thus we are getting warm*

*We lean on each other, thus we survive*

*Even though in the freezing human world we lose our identities.*

...

...

## 16. Interiority, Self and Home

### **Interiority, self-contradiction and *homeawayness***

To leave home in order to make a home, or to make a home away from home, one's migratory life itself is oxymoronic. 'Humans are full of contradictions,' David Berliner (2016: 2) contends. One may live with self-contradictions; but one may not live in harmony with oneself. One part of the self may fight with the other part internally—in other words, interiority is 'an individual's inner consciousness, the continual conversation one has with oneself' (Rapport 2008: 330). Beneath the seemingly calm surface of social life, private inner struggles may be ongoing:

What appear on the surfaces of social life, Woolf offers, are the pinnacles of the mind while the connecting landscape remains below the surface. This subterranean landscape is itself shot through with caverns and tunnels, each reverberating with memory, fantasy and anticipation so intimate and subtle that they might evade verbalisation even by the person whose experiences they are. (Rapport 2008: 334)

In order to really understand what someone says or does, it is crucial to attempt to think about what they are thinking and to try to feel what they are feeling interiorly. That is, we cannot fully understand someone's exterior life without trying to know their interiority. 'Interior conversation is an existential norm, which holds a key to understanding social life' (Rapport 2008: 330) and it is, I would argue, particularly important in the exploration of migrants' experience of home when they are away from home. The contradictory nature of movement and home—to leave home in order to make a home—may largely engender a contradictory sense of *homeawayness*, which manifests as migrants' constant internal arguments of trying to make sense of the self, home and the world. Being away from home with either spatial or temporal distance, one's experience of home mainly engages in 'imaginative projects of disembodiment and otherness' (Rapport 2009: 32-33), which is an individual interior consciousness. In short, to explore

a migrant's interior world can help understand his or her idea of home and the experience of *home(-awayness)*, and vice versa.

To take an example, when Yang Cui threw a food bag into the courtyard rubbish pile she followed this action with an explanation: *'Ah, here, everyone does it like that... But we don't do it at home... And I never do it in front of my girl'* (I have addressed this 'moment of littering' in Chapter Three). To fully understand the momentary act of littering and Yang Cui's explanation, what she was thinking and feeling in her head—her interior consciousness—cannot be ignored. Seeing my puzzled facial expression regarding her act of littering, she immediately became self-conscious, and her self-awareness became apparent. For a brief moment, what came to her mind were themes such as *self* and *others* ('I' and 'everyone'), *home* and *non-home* space ('here' and 'at home') and life *with* and *without* her daughter ('And I never do it in front of my girl'). Words and phrases like *'here'* *'everyone'* *'at home'* and *'my girl'* served as spilt fragments of the flow of her interior conversation within that fleeting moment, and together seemed like an orderly explanation: to make a moral self-justification of her act and thus to create self-consistency.

Here is another example. As I have mentioned, Yang Cui had a seemingly elegant life philosophy in her social life: *'We are human beings and human beings are supposed to have a live-life; we are not donkeys'*. That was the philosophy that she practised in her everyday life, socially and privately, behaviourally and ideationally. With the knowledge of her interior conversations, we can understand her life-philosophy. On the one hand, it is a way of her self-making-sense of her 'viscous' relationship with Lao Bo—when she was with Lao Bo she felt a *live-life*; on the other hand, it is a way of self-encouragement to sublimate herself—to live a life for her daughter (with spatial distance) and for a future home (with temporal distance).

Beneath the surface of this smart and neat life philosophy was her rich though tumultuous interiority, which took the shape of such a philosophy. Living with self-contradictions, she vacillatingly accommodated her mind between the 'here and now'—being not at home and having no future (having Lao Bo), and 'there and then'—where she believed her home and her future was (having her daughter). In other words, she had a home in her mind that was rooted in the future (of her daughter) while having her

everyday life uprooted from that future home. Her floating mind-set of *homeawayness* accommodated her inner self-contradictions.

Being *homeaway*, as I have argued, one lives a life with spatial or/and temporal distance. That is, one roots a home (either concrete or conceptual) ‘there and then’. Thus, the home ‘there and then’ gives one direction and empowers one to live a life towards it. To Yang Cui (and to many others), home had weight and power. It gave her temporal orientation from moment to moment in her present life. The moment, for instance, that Yang Cui made the decision to put down her mobile phone and not to call Lao Bo, she pulled her inner self in the direction of her future home, which was embedded in the future of her daughter. She wanted to make a phone call at that moment but in the end she did not. She had a *moment of choice* in terms of the making of her future home. Such a moment of choice, to some extent, is a ‘moment of hope’ for her to strike ‘with a perspective whose direction is opposite to that of the moment’ (Miyazaki 2004: 23). ‘[H]ope in the present points to its own future moment of salvation’ (Benjamin, cited in Miyazaki 2004: 22).

To Yang Cui, although the home was future-orientated, it germinated and grew out of her temporal self-contradictory and vacillating mind-set, which was still *coming-into-knowing*. Yang Cui’s future home was constructed (and reconstructed) through her existential *moments of choice* in her everyday life, such as whether or not to date Lao Bo (again), whether or not to stop playing *Getting warm*, and whether or not to take a day off a month (usually factory workers in Bomaqiao only take one day off per month). At these moments of making choices, ‘the spark of hope flies up in the midst of the radical temporal reorientation’ in her own analyses (Benjamin, cited in Miyazaki 2004: 23). The future home, therefore, was not an illusion in her mind but was tirelessly embedded in and pervaded her self-awareness of her present everyday life. The future for her had become a ‘model for actions in a present moment’ (Miyazaki 2016: 157), while the (future) home ‘serves as a method of radical temporal reorientation of knowledge’ (Miyazaki 2004: 5). The future home, in this sense, had become an *existential strategy* for Yang Cui to deal with her present self-contradictions.

### Interiority and self-making

Being called *Yang Jie* (Elder Sister Yang) respectfully by many factory workers (including me) and her *laoxiang* (fellow villagers), Yang Cui was maintaining a rather high social profile. As a mother, she believed that she was working hard in order to earn money for her beloved daughter's (supposedly) promising future. As a *lao yuan gong* (long-term employee), she knew that she had gained special trust from the factory boss Shunxin, in contrast to those workers who came and went frequently. As a bet collector, she was proud of the job as it showed her senior position among her *laoxiang*. Moreover, she received respect for helping people: for instance, she got up during the night of a typhoon and headed to Grandma Chang's room to see whether she needed any help and to check for possible risks and dangers (it is risky to live in the ramshackle courtyard-houses especially in the typhoon weather); she successfully stopped one of her *laoxiang* from committing suicide due to the loss of all of their savings on gambling; and she introduced me to her social circle to protect me and help me to survive as a naive new migrant worker in the life of the industrial park.

All of these are the fixed and hard realities that manifested as 'the pinnacles of the mind' (Woolf 1980, in Rapport 2008: 334). They appeared on the surfaces of Yang Cui's social life. These 'pinnacles of the mind' are, for example, the *already-made decision* to be away from her rural home (and temporally apart from her daughter) and to work to save money, the *stable feeling* of being proud of her bet-collecting job, or the *firm attitude* of helping the others around her. How about the rest of the mind that is not yet fixed and still in the process of *coming-into-knowing*? That is, beneath the surface of social life is the connecting landscape—below 'the pinnacles of the mind'—which is still shaping and *coming-into-being*; for example, decisions that are not yet made, feelings that are not yet stable but fluid, attitudes that are still ambiguous and contradictory, and values that are incompatible.

For instance, during one morning shift in the toy assembly workroom, Yang Cui's hands would have kept assembling toys. She would be paid 32 *yuan* for her work while her state of mind might have been all about the struggle of her 'sticky' relationship with Lao Bo. The reality of action can be, as Albert Piette (2016: 18) points out, 'a body in the process of moving' with 'a state of mind that often has nothing to do with the action in

progress'. Beneath the robot-like repetitive acts of assemblage, Yang Cui might have been experiencing a deafeningly silent morning, struggling to get herself out of the 'viscous' relationship she had with Lao Bo.

Yang Cui had a strong feeling about staying with Lao Bo and she loved her daughter, but these two sentiments pulled her in different directions. On the one hand, in principle, she believed that her future was embedded in the future of her daughter while her relationship with Lao Bo 'had no future', as she told me many times and as—I suppose—she had told herself many more times. On the other hand, she was finding it difficult to stop the relationship with Lao Bo as her strong feelings for him continued, though she was constantly faced with ethical dilemmas—Yang Cui even dreamed about Lao Bo's wife and her angrily breaking into their (Yang Cui and Lao Bo's) room. In other words, she lived with her principles, with paradoxically overwhelming concern for her left-behind daughter, but she also harboured emotions about living an everyday life that were opposed to the principle. Her internal fighting manifested her internal multiplicity and self-contradictions. Her life continued, as did her self-contradiction.

That is, one will create one's own *coming-into-being* realities, which germinate and grow out of the 'subterranean landscape' of one's interior arguments, which may be filled with contradictions. To some extent, the flexible nature of self-contradiction in human lives implies the potential of any possible *coming-into-being* (and 'not-yet') mind-set, which could lead to a new change of socio-cultural life. Here, it is worth clarifying that to distinguish the obvious 'pinnacles of the mind' and the hidden 'connecting landscape' of the mind is not to divide the whole mind. Rather, it emphasises the *continuous transforming* process of a self-making (Toren 2002: 106), which is beneath the apparent, formed (though possibly temporary) 'social crust' and is constantly being constituted interiorly. 'We are, therefore, not stable or set pieces, with established and immutable essences, destinies, or identities,' Jackson concludes (2012: 5).

### **Interiority and socio-cultural creativity**

We do not live a life just with certain social profiles but also with our individual interiority. We may choose to expose some part of our self to the exterior world and to keep other parts just to ourselves. We are social beings while to some extent we remain



solitary. Interiority serves as a private space for individuals to withdraw from a conversation with the exterior world and to keep their own secrets. Thus, interiority—the conversation one has with oneself—manifests itself as silencing to the exterior world.

At this point, an important question arises: Why does one withdraw from a conversation with the exterior world into silence? Or, why is one withdrawn to begin with, and only sometimes makes the decision to engage? For self-imposed silence, the act of withdrawal creates a boundary for oneself to stop being hurt by the exterior force, an attempt to '[s]ustain a centre of one's own' (Vallikivi 2012, cited in Seljamaa and Siim 2016: 6). Thus, interiority is a non-communicational means of self-expression to achieve control over the exterior world. In this sense, one's self-imposed silence is not just a matter of personal choice but is 'informed by shared evaluations and resources of conduct deemed acceptable or desirable' (Munoz 2014, cited in Seljamaa and Siim 2016: 6). In other words, according to the existing socio-cultural norms, what one keeps silent may be 'things that are deemed unacceptable, and should neither happen nor be talked about' (Seljamaa and Siim 2016: 8). So, one chooses to be silent in a certain situation based on certain socio-cultural norms.

Nevertheless, some other important questions remain: What if one does not choose to be silent (any more)? What if an un-made decision becomes determined or unstable feelings become stable? What if ambiguous attitudes become clear? What if incompatible values become compatible? An individual might break his or her silence and let their unvoiced voice be heard. As a way of self-awareness, individual interiority may engender self-knowledge while triggering 'the adoption of new ideas and attitudes', which can cause a moral breakdown and become 'a source for personal and cultural invention' (Zigon, cited in Berliner 2016: 5). In other words,

Those [are] social and personal moments when persons or groups of persons are forced to step-away from their unreflective everydayness and think-through, figure out, work on themselves and respond to certain ethical dilemmas, troubles or problems. (Zigon 2007: 140, cited in Berliner 2016: 5)

A moral struggle or a moral breakdown can be a significant moment in an individual's life. Simultaneously, it can 'create a new pattern of reality' (Douglas 2011[1966]: 39) in which the unvoiced voice finds a place in the exterior world, challenging certain socio-cultural norms. When one's self-imposed silence is broken by oneself, it may manifest itself as 'aberrant forms' (ibid.) against certain socio-cultural schemes. Since one's interiority exists before it transforms into aberrant forms appearing in the exterior world, we may argue in this sense that one's interiority can be the *pre-form* of socio-cultural creativity.

## Conclusion and Prospectus

### *Keywords for Studying Home-in-Movement*



Figure 72 - A window of the old courtyard-house (Photograph by the author)

This conclusion has two aims: to look back at the thesis and to look forward at future research on migration and home. Instead of writing separate parts for each of these aims, I propose (in looking forward) five keywords for studying home-in-movement—*homeawayness*, *moments of being*, *interiority*, *cosmopolitan imagination*, and *walking knowledge*—which emerged over the course of writing this ethnography. Reviewing how each of these keywords emerged from the ethnographic material and how they came to be coined (homeawayness), adopted (moments of being), applied (interiority) and phrased (cosmopolitan imagination and walking knowledge) can provide the key insights that my research has yielded. I explore how these keywords serve a theoretical and

methodological quest in endeavouring to better understand human existential conditions in a world of movement, in particular in regard to migrants' ideas of home and their diverse ways of making home.

For migrants leaving home and moving to an unknown and alien place, the movement creates a space for them to construct and reconstruct home through their everyday lived experience of being away from home. How may 'home' become a 'moveable concept' (Bammer 1992: vii) in a mobile world? How do the migrants make sense of home as a process of constantly making it? How do they make sense of a new economic opportunity—moving to cities or other countries in order to earn money—as a way of making home through investing in the future by not enjoying the present? It is crucial to address these questions in studying home-making and migration as a universal human practice, something beyond the cultural consideration of the Chinese idea of home or Chinese migration.

In this Conclusion, along with the elaboration of the five keywords for studying home-in-movement, I will allow ethnographic details from my research to enter into a dialogue with the wider literature beyond the examination of *the* Chinese idea of home. By doing so, I hope, first, to explicitly bring out key themes that will enable an understanding of the idea of home that emerged in between the writing of different moments throughout the thesis; and second, to broaden conceptual considerations of 'home' and explore the concept's analytical potential in the contemporary world, which is marked by unprecedented mobility.

## **\* Homeawayness \***

... ..

*I want to fly!!*

*A Jiao I love you.*

*I miss home so so much!*

*Zhiqiang Lin loves Lijiao Xu.*

*My heart feels so tired, so so tired...*

*I wait, wait, and wait! When will my money (wage) come?*

*Don't! Irritate! Me! Fuck your mum! I don't want to work anymore!*

*Ying, could you please come back to me?*

*I love you, ten thousand years!*

*You are my Ying, forever.*

*I want to kill someone!*

*I am almost crazy!*

*Am I still alive?*

*Where am I?*

... ..

After I wrote down ‘\* Homeawayness \*’ as a title, I immediately thought about the graffiti written on the toilet wall in the Shunxin Factory, words that conveyed the migrant factory workers’ homeawayness in their own terms. I cannot help but mention them again here (they were mentioned in Chapter Four). Aching with love, with missing home, with tiredness, with frustration for a wage, with anger, with existential crisis, the migrants’ longing for home, for love, for success was expressed so explicitly and honestly. While they usually did not speak so honestly to one another (to the factory boss, to other migrant workers or to me), in the privacy of the toilet they found a place to inscribe their aching inner cries, a space to express their homeawayness.

A few weeks before I finished my fieldwork in the Shunxin Factory, the boss repainted the toilet walls, so the graffiti was ‘submerged’. Seeing the newly painted white

toilet walls, I wondered how many layers of graffiti had been covered underneath the one I had seen, how many more inner voices had been prevented from being heard. I also thought that another new layer of graffiti would appear sooner or later. The graffiti was a kind of message to their factory boss, but more importantly, a kind of expression for its own sake—a glimpse into how a migrant worker lived a life within the ‘non-home’ space of the factory-house.

Looking back, the term ‘homeawayness’ comes from my endeavour or ‘journey’ to make sense of the migrant factory workers’ everyday life-expressions (like the graffiti) in the urban space. Being home-away, one’s experience of home manifests itself as various efforts to make a home: namely, a self-justification for littering in a ‘non-home’ space (Yang Cui, in Chapter Three), gambling, not for gambling’s sake but to gain *shenghuo* (live-life) (Yang Cui and many other factory workers, in Chapter Four), and the common joyfulness from the toilet blockage news that momentarily shapes the invisible boundaries between the workers and bosses, migrants and locals, ‘we’ and ‘you’, the self and others (most of the assembly workers in Shunxin Factory, in Chapter Four). Since one anchors oneself to a home not here and now, one thus cognitively detaches oneself from the real world around; that is, one remains a stranger to the world around.

Most rural-urban migrants return home once a year, usually during the Chinese New Year. For the other eleven months of the year, they are away-from-home in the cities. Being-at-home for them becomes their annual holiday while being-away-from-home comes to stand for their everyday life. Experiencing everyday life for most of the time somewhere that is not considered home, many of them possess (or are possessed by) an alternative sense of homeawayness.

Moving away from home brings not only newness and opportunities into one’s life but also strangers, uncertainty, and contrary perspectives. If one can embrace the differences among people, uncertainty can become a potential opportunity, opposing views can feed one’s open mind, and dissenters do not weaken the ‘self’ but strengthen it. Contrariwise, possessing or being possessed by a sense of homeawayness, one remains a stranger in his or her surrounding world while distortion and discrimination may stem from the imagination of others—the imagination that, to some degree, exaggerates the difference, the weaknesses in-between the self and the others. In this sense, as a key

element in understanding the rural migrants' identity formation through the lens of the 'others', homeawayness has wider application in terms of the different forms of discrimination and distortion that may become consequences of such a means of *identity formation* (discussed in Chapter Four).

It is worth mentioning that in this thesis, I use the term 'identity' loosely to refer to an individual's making sense of 'who I am'; and the phrase 'identity formation' to refer to the process of making sense of 'who I am', which involves continuous self-negotiation between the self and others.

In a world largely shaped by migration and movement, 'home' becomes a key concept in social and cultural anthropology (Rapport and Overing 2000), mainly because the analysis of identity can occur in terms of conceptualisations of home (Rapport and Dawson 1998). Among the key anthropological studies on home and home-making in a world of movement, one of the main critiques is that a broader understanding of home should be employed in order to *transcend* traditional definitions and classifications of notions of home and identity according to locality, ethnicity, religiosity or nationality (Rapport and Overing 2000: 157). What happens to the use of our idea of 'home' to reclaim our identity, which 'may be multiple, situational, individual and paradoxical' (ibid.), given a world shaped by migration and movement? Thus, it becomes crucial to decentre home as a fixed and static space for one to reclaim one's identity and integrity, and to reconsider home as one's continuous self-negotiation of identity formation:

- 'There is no going home,' says Stuart Hall. Or, more precisely, 'you can go home again, you just can't stay' (Hall, cited in Farred 1996: 28).
- Michael Jackson (2012: 69) asks, 'how much home does a person need'?
- 'It is not that there is no place like home but, rather, that there is nowhere one can feel entirely at home' (Jackson 2012: 73).
- John Berger points out, 'every migrant knows in his heart of hearts, that it is impossible to return' (cited in Jackson 2012: 69).

When Xiao Bin (in Chapter Three) went back to her rural home, she found that she could not stay anymore; she belonged to 'the outside world'. The moment one finds one 'can't



stay', the boundaries of home are re-negotiated. One is negotiating with oneself a broader understanding of home, or if not broader, then multiple. As a conceptual space, one's original home (usually where one was born and grew up) may serve well to 'accommodate' one's nostalgia, providing a context for one to trace one's origins. However, the space may not be enough for one to 'accommodate' one's struggles of identity formation and of internal divisions within one's migratory experience. The movement of migration implies a future, an exploration, or a discovery. Home becomes a cognitive space for one's constant *self-(re)definition* or *self-(re)discovery*.

The floating mind-set of homeawayness expresses such continuing self-negotiation when identities are performed; there is a continual oscillation between those identities that are being imposed and those self-recognised, between one's reality and one's imagination, one's past and one's future, and one's rootedness and one's cosmopolitan openness. If home is understood as 'where one best knows oneself' (Rapport and Dawson 1998: 4), then the floating mind-set of homeawayness manifests itself as the constant process of self-reconstruction or re-imagination when one moves away from home, and the movement might instead become a fundamentally important process of coming home (a coming that is *not yet* home) within oneself. Therefore, in regard to 'homeawayness', a key concept I propose for studying home-in-movement, *its analytical potential lies in the way in which it locates 'home' at the nexus of identity dynamics*. It emphasises the temporal dimension of one's experience of home beyond the spatial dimension—which I will elaborate on when discussing the next keyword that I would like to propose: 'moments of being'.

## **\* Moments of Being \***

In this thesis, I introduce ‘moments of being’ from Virginia Woolf (1976) as a key device to approach migrants’ experience of home and to write the thesis. But, I am not the only one to employ the phrase from Virginia Woolf. I refer to works such as Rapport (e.g. 1994a, 1997b, 2008, 2009, 2013), Jackson (e.g. 2005), and Jackson and Piette (2015). Connecting Virginia Woolf’s (1927) fictional writing on moments of being to existential anthropology, Jackson (2005: xiii) points out,

Though this is fiction, and concerned with the flux and subtle gradings of lived experience, it succeeds in giving up a vivid sense of what is at stake at any moment of being, and in introducing us to some of the ways in which existential-phenomenological thought has theorised the question of being. (Jackson 2005: xiii)

Within the flow of life, it is not easy to ‘grasp intellectually all the variables at play in any action or all the repercussions that follow from it’ but there are ‘[moments of being] when we are afforded glimpses into what is at stake for the actors, and how they experience the social field in which they find themselves’ (ibid.: xv):

- Not explicitly using the phrase ‘moments of being’ but emphasising the potentially deep significance of momentary experience, for example, Michael Taussig (2011: 1) took notes and drawings for the fleeting moment of his seeing a woman sewing a man into a white nylon bag when he passed through a tunnel in a taxi. It was Taussig’s moment of observation that unfolded and opened up rich and numerous possibilities of interpretation, and eventually resulted in his book: *I Swear I Saw This: Drawings In Fieldwork Notebooks, Namely My Own*.
- In *Ordinary Affects*, Kathleen Steward (2007: 19) talks about ‘the odd moments’ like ‘spacing out when a strange malaise comes over you.’ She argues, ‘[i]t is the

intensity born of a momentary suspension of narrative, or a glitch in the projects we call things like the self, agency, home, a life' (ibid.).

- In another example, Veena Das (2016) talks about '*Fleeting Moments that Might Last Forever*' on the aesthetic emotion when she gave the Durham Castle Lecture in 2016. Each moment comes into being through a rhizome; it has its root and it grows, filled with love, hate, joy, sadness, surprise, boredom, peace and/or violence, and so on.
- In studying the Chinese 'diaspora', Shelly Chan (2015) critically treats 'diaspora' as a dynamic series of moments rather than a fixed set of communities. She argues that 'diaspora represents a shifting dialogue about Chinese connections' and 'encapsulates the fluid condition of being Chinese in the world' (2015: 120-122).

All in all, these show us the way that we experience and make sense of our lives momentarily. What makes this momentary experience of life especially important for the study of home and migration?

In the Introduction, I explained why and how I introduced 'moments of being' (Woolf 1976) in writing this thesis: *It is not me, an anthropologist, who chooses moments of being as a key device to write about home, it is the nature of experiencing home—home is experienced and made sense of momentarily—that chooses it.* It is a demand from my fieldwork 'data', as well as my moments of being during my fieldwork. Let me then review a couple of moments of being about how home is experienced and made sense of momentarily from the thesis (as a looking back) and propose it as another keyword for studying home-in-movement (as a looking forward).

Similar to the emotional intensity I felt whenever I read the graffiti written on the toilet wall, I have read Zeng's (in Chapter Two) last piece of *qiaopi* family letter again and again, many times, out loud. Each time I read it, there is a moment where it is as if I am hearing Zeng's 'wild inner screams', feeling his feeling, experiencing his experience. It was Zeng's moment of being as well as mine:

To my wife and my son:

...You are all wrong, however! ...Now I am over fifty. I even worry about myself. My income is inadequate to meet my expenses. How can I have money for you to build a new floor? Please don't kid yourself. ...You are all shameless! I felt so ashamed of you when my boss mentioned to me about 'your whole family's begging visit'. The stuff I had already brought home last year was rather considerable. You are so greedy! ... [12 July 1974. Zeng] (Wang 2011: 112, 113)

This last piece of *qiaopi* was Zeng's key point in his life narrative, when he decided he would stop sending remittances home, when he said 'no' for the first time, to his Chinese family's request for more money. He decided to stop what he was doing under the 'dual family system'. This point was, as I have argued, a particularly obvious 'moment of being' for Zeng, providing him with an impetus to change direction.

Gabrielle McIntire (2007: 102, 167) interprets Woolf's 'moments of being' as 'instances of particular ontological and epistemological intensity' that 'occur when one receives an emotional blow analogous to physical "shock" that disrupts the ordinary flow of perception'. To Zeng, the repudiation of his first family served as the 'shock' that 'pierced through' the 'kind of nondescript cotton wool' (Woolf 1985: 70) of his everyday, un-reflexive existence, perhaps providing 'a brief moment of illumination' (McIntire 2007: 167) in which he was suddenly conscious of his ontology—a moment in which he knew who he was. Reading his last piece of *qiaopi* from Zeng, his 'inner voice' is clearly audible: *My mother has passed away; my son is now grown up and should be old enough to support the family in China; I am getting old now and also have my new family responsibilities here in Thailand so I have now decided to stop sending more qiaopi to my Chinese home.*

But this was not the only point at which Zeng was consciously exploring how he wished to live and balance his obligations to different people. Through his 110 pieces of *qiaopi*, one is able to see that his whole life was a constant effort to work things out in a way he could live with. Beyond that life-changing moment, his life had been full of less dramatic moments of being, or moments which were rather more tricky, or moments of

intuitive anxiety, in which he was consciously trying to find out, for example, what filial piety meant for a migrant in the new world of economic opportunities. He might have wondered: *How do I make sense of my emigration? How do I stay authentic to my original self, my 'home self'? Why am I here?* Each time when he was writing a piece of *qiaopi*, he might have consciously looked back to Confucianism and he found that to fulfil his filial duty enabled him to attach himself in an authentic way, something that helped him express his identity as the only son of a Chinese family. Through his Chinese identity, he felt that filial piety, a concept that can be traced to ancient Chinese philosophy, was somehow a defining part of him and his Chinese identity. Though he was not physically at home, his *qiaopi* resonated with ancient Chinese philosophy and history. By echoing ancient Chinese philosophy in those moments when he wrote, he was able to make sense of himself and the practice of emigration. At the end of the psychological process, he might have given himself the answer: *Okay, that (filial piety) is why I need to obey my mother and stay in Thailand, no matter how much I wish to return home; I need to devote myself to my parents (mother) and remain diligent here; it is an ancient moral obligation that I, as a son, owe them (her).*

Zeng, as a migrant writing *qiaopi*, put great effort into making sense of himself and his practice of migration. As an anthropologist, when I write about Zeng I try to be as true as possible to my experience of reading his *qiaopi*, and 'listening' to his 'voice' moment by moment. For each moment that I 'catch' him, between the lines, though it may be fleeting, reveals certain truths about Zeng as a sojourner. It does not have to be a typical way of being for Zeng in his daily life to be meaningful or significant. It could be significant because it expresses a moment that occurred in Zeng's life, making it possible to get close to the Zeng. Zeng made sense of who he was and his life momentarily, while I made sense of Zeng's experience through his moments of being. Like a connecting rod, our (Zeng's and mine) moments of being become the very interface where our singular and personal experiences abut.

Let me quickly review another fleeting moment to explain this point - when Yang Cui threw a food bag into the courtyard rubbish pile (in Chapter Three). Seeing my puzzled facial expression regarding her act of littering, she immediately became self-conscious. Trying to make sense of my momentary experience expressed through my puzzled face,

Yang Cui went through her flow of interior conversations within that fleeting moment, and came out with her 'self-justification': *'Ah, here, everyone does it like that... But we don't do it at home... And I never do it in front of my girl'*. She made sense of her act momentarily through a response to my momentary attempt to make sense of her act; in other words, our singular and personal experiences abutted - she read my mind (partially) at the moment when I tried to read her mind (partially as well, I think).

It is at this point—to reiterate, *like a connecting rod, our moments of being may serve as the very interface where our singular and personal experiences abut*—that I would like to highlight the theoretical and methodological potential that Virginia Woolf's 'moments of being' may have for anthropology, and propose 'moments of being' as a keyword for studying migrants' experience of home: ontologically, moments of being as a way of being (experiencing home), and epistemologically, moments of being as a way of knowing (home).

Home can be defined in relation to family, a dwelling, a homeland, an attachment or a journey, among other things. However, how can we recognise those 'homes' and the way in which they are crafted into the migrants' lives? It is, I argue, not the central issue to define home and to find out how home is represented in certain forms. What is centrally significant is how home is experienced and how it interacts with one's subjectivity. For instance, in Zeng's case, that would relate to the question of how home was written into Zeng's sojourning life (through his momentary experience in writing *qiaopi*), or, in Yang Cui's littering moment, that would relate to how her body performed in a way that articulated her idea about 'home' and 'non-home' space (through her act of littering and her self-justification). *Home is what it is within a moment that one experiences it*. What home is varies from one individual to another, or even within an individual, and it may vary from one moment to another.

In short, since home is experienced momentarily and reflectively, *'moments of being' provide ethnographic entry points for looking at our understanding about home that take priority in each moment, and how home is 'constructed' therefore into consciousness and told or expressed*. And, this points to the importance of investigating individual inner consciousness, which relates to the next keyword that I would like to propose: 'interiority'.

## \* Interiority \*

### *A massively single number*<sup>59</sup>

By Jinniu Guo

*A person crossed a province, another province, and another province  
A person took a train, a coach, and then a black bus  
Next stop*

*Our Motherland, it organized me a Temporary Residence Permit.  
Our Motherland, it accepted the Temporary Residence Fee I handed over.*

*'Torrential rain, floods in the streets.'  
Spring's branches were Our Motherland's shampoo girl  
She wanted to sell springtime*

*'Bright moonlight, shining on our Earthy Paradise.'  
Second uncle, youngest uncle, brother Red Guard, three bar-headed geese spooked  
by the twang of the bow string  
one captured by the camphorwood Refugee Centre  
one lost for thirteen days  
one a bit stubborn, couldn't jump about for a few days*

*'Little white cabbage, tears streaming down.'  
Someone in the south broke into a rented room  
Oh god. It's a raid to check Temporary Residence Permits.*

*Northerner Sister Li, someone standing in the south with pyjamas undone  
Northerner Sister Li, carrying a broken chrysanthemum  
Northerner Sister Li, hanging from a banyan tree  
Lightly. As if her flesh and blood weighted nothing at all.*

*Alas, I came too late to help her.*

This is a poem written by a migrant, a poet, Jinniu Guo. This is Guo's inner consciousness frozen into words: this is a version of individual interiority. It reveals to us the poet's state of mind, wondering about his fate as well as the fate of the innumerable

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<sup>59</sup> In *A Massively Single Number – An Anthology*, edited by Yang Lian, 2015.



millions of migrant workers in China. It expresses a migrant's perception of how the millions of migrants are perceived without individuality but as 'a massively single number'. It illustrates how dominant assumptions affect Chinese rural migrants' self-image. It challenges the moral and political issues in doing research on rural-urban migration in China.

With political concerns, how can an anthropological project morally avoid falling into the fallacy of presumed categories in regard to its research subjects? What methodological implementation can better facilitate an anthropological investigation (including the anthropological project of archival research) in regard to this moral concern? In what follows, I will address these two questions through considering the possible methodological and political (moral) implications of an anthropological project that pays attention to the exploration of *individual interiority*.

Individual interiority is 'an individual's inner consciousness, the continual conversation one has with oneself' (Rapport 2008: 330). As I have argued (Yang Cui, in Chapter Five), individual interiority can be understood as one's walking knowledge in the process of *getting to know* the self. Hence, an anthropological study that makes interiority as crucial element must also be a kind of walking knowledge towards the understanding of its research subjects, who themselves are in the process of getting to know themselves. Firstly, this *implies* that such an anthropological study (that pays attention to exploring individual interiority) might avoid *defining* or *labelling* a research subject as a 'fixed' or 'definite' certain kind. It emphasises the importance of trying 'to follow' the invisible (though maybe feel-able) flow of an informant's interior consciousness crafted through various social relations. In practice, in conducting such fieldwork, 'to follow' means to feel, to imagine or to build up 'empathic connections' (Edgar 2004: 44) with the research subjects in order to better understand them. Secondly, the very act of 'following' *implies* that such an anthropological account is sourced from the research subjects' conscious moments of being and the life-projects (Rapport 2003) which are constituted by those moments of being, through the diverse ways in which research subjects consciously 'write' their own everyday life 'texts': dreaming and narrating the dream, littering and making a self-justification for the act of littering, writing *qiaopi* and making a home, just to name some such ways.

In particular, in my anthropological study of migration and home, these two implications have methodological and political (moral) significance. In terms of the methodological aspect, interiority serves as an *analytical tool* for my research because it emerged as a feature of the fieldwork data—a crucial part of Yang Cui (one of my key informants) beyond her social life, as well as other informants. In regard to the political (moral) aspect, using interiority as an *entry point* for conducting my research and for analysing my research data largely avoids *reinforcing* dominant discourses that seek to *define* or *label* my informants with reductive categorisations. I will elaborate these two significant aspects based on the two research contexts with which my research engaged: the historical Chinese Nanyang (Southeast Asia) migration and the current rural-urban migration in China.

### **Methodological implications**

Whether conducting the fieldwork or doing *qiaopi* archival research, my primary concern was to pay attention to the human beings' existential conditions—such as one's living, experience, feeling, thinking, imagination, and self-conversations—that engaged these people affectively within their trajectory of being away from home. In doing ethnographic fieldwork, from what I managed 'to follow', Yang Cui's interiority revealed to us her self-negotiation between the self and home, the present and future, reality and hope, as well as an individual *shenghuo* (live-life) and socio-cultural morality.

In doing *qiaopi* archival research, I also found that individual interiority played a central role in understanding the Nanyang (Southeast Asia) migrants' lives and their experience of home away from home. What lay beneath the neat and civilised *qiaopi* genre was the migrants' hidden flow of interior consciousness. In between the lines of each piece of *qiaopi*, I could sense the moans and groans: feelings inhabited within words and beyond words. To hear groans in between the lines, to feel feelings beyond the words, required me 'to follow' a *qiaopi* author's flow of interior conversations as the writing went on. Therefore, the *qiaopi* were examined as a living process that inscribed their authors' (the Nanyang migrants', like Zeng's) individual interior consciousness—as a living process of *coming-into-being*, rather than as a frozen 'collective consciousness' or a 'fixed' historical finished product. To examine *qiaopi* as a living process of *coming-*

*into-being* is to insist upon a temporal approach to a migrant's momentary experience of home and the world.

Beyond the individual level, interiority also served as an entry point for my better understanding of certain phenomena (we may call them 'social phenomena') in the migrants' lives. That is, making sense of those phenomena was not based on what the phenomena explicitly showed us or reflected but on digging into individual interiority. These individual cases have not been employed as evidence to support or explain certain social phenomena in order to produce representational views of the migrants; they have been employed to explore 'the connecting landscape below the surface' (Woolf, cited in Rapport 2008: 334) of certain social phenomena at an individual level, and to scrutinise the process of how an individual comes to be in a particular position and how one's interiority is (still) constantly at play while the surface of the social phenomenon emerges.

This brings us to a further question, of how individual interiority plays an essential, though implicit role in the process of understanding an emerging social or cultural phenomenon, including 'negotiating conditions of societal and cultural change' (Seljamaa and Siim 2016: 7). In Zeng's case, we know that the dual family was a very common phenomenon in the history of Nanyang migration, where there was the so-called 'dual family system' (Chen 1939). By exploring Zeng's interiority in between the lines of his *qiaopi* writing, we can understand how a dual family implies the dual self of a migrant. We can approach the 'social phenomenon' of the 'dual family system' with rich and vivid individual feelings in regard to the struggling, the sentiments, the love and the desperation of the situation. Thus, archival research of *qiaopi* that has a concern for the migrants' interiority highlights how individual migrants authored their life through *qiaopi* correspondence over and above the contingencies of the social, cultural, and historical circumstances.

Similarly, Yang Cui and Lao Bo's 'viscous' relationship is not an isolated case among rural-urban migrants in urban China. It is a common hidden phenomenon, called '*linshi fuqi*' (temporary couple)—living like husband and wife in cities despite having spouses and children back home in the rural areas (Wu 2014). Instead of treating them as a 'social problem' (ibid.) and aiming to produce representational views of my research

subjects or to impose the label of ‘*linshi fuqi*’ on them, however, I attempted to follow individual interiority, like Yang Cui’s, and to capture individuals’ rich though maybe momentary experience—which may disrupt any representative views. In addition, to listen to one’s interior self-arguments, to some degree, is to acknowledge their capacities: how they manage to affirm themselves with regard to their lives. Not just to Yang Cui but also my other informants, the affirmations manifest as their own individual moments of being within their everyday lives being away from home. For instance, Zeng managed and manifested his internal multiplicity by writing and sending *qiaopi* home. To give another example, Yang Cui strengthened and reassured her undecided decision (to stop her relationship with Lao Bo) by visiting a fortune-teller. Moreover, avoiding *labelling* a research subject but attempting to follow his or her interiority has its political implications.

### **Political implications**

The possible political implications of an anthropological research project are related to how it can (possibly) speak intelligibly to other scholars and to its research subjects, to policy and to the public, without falling into the fallacy of presumed categories.

In most of the recent research on the historical Chinese Nanyang migration, the migrants are labelled as ‘*hua qiao*’ (overseas Chinese) in a predetermined manner embedded with stylised discourses such as their patriotism (e.g. Zhang and Huang 2016: 100-102; Zhang and Li 2016), homeland nostalgia (e.g. Wang and Yang 2007; Zhang and Huang 2016: 97-100), traditional clan culture (e.g. Chen 2016; Li 2016; Zhang and Huang 2016: 95-97), hardship and ambitions (e.g. Chen 2016: 91-92), good faith and moral-based credit system (e.g. Chen 2016: 92; Jia 2016). Due to its predetermined manner, most of the research findings from *qiaopi* archival research are, ironically, about these socio-cultural or historical discourses. In other words, the migrants’ individual stories drawn from *qiaopi* letters serve only as evidence to support or to explain the dominant (though implicit) assumptions regarding them; that is, using *an individual phenomenon* to explain *the socio-cultural phenomenon* within a predetermined framework. Such a research approach limits itself and blocks its perspectives in regard to individual agency and creativity *beyond* or *against* the existing socio-cultural discourses.

Within the framework, individual cases only serve to support certain socio-cultural discourses.

Likewise, in recent research on the current rural-urban migration in China, the migrants are often called '*nong min gong*', or in short, '*min gong*' (peasant workers) (e.g. Wang 2016; Zhou 2005) or with a gender focus as '*da gong mei*' (working sisters) (e.g. Jacka 1998, 2005; Pun 2005). The researchers often inevitably end up crafting narratives that are based on a dominant (though often hidden) assumption that places the migrants in the position of a kind of 'victim', even though they might also attempt to highlight the migrants as a tactical body of agents who strive to survive (e.g. Pan 2005: 20). Usually, the dominant assumption tends to have a moralistic tone, producing a sense that rural-urban migration is a problem requiring a solution. That is to say, the rural-urban migrants are pre-categorised as a marginal group of people even before the research has been set up. Among academia, policy-makers, and public media, the most commonly used political term in regard to the rural-urban migration in China is *nong min gong wenti* (the peasant workers issue/problem). As with a teleology that explains phenomena in terms of their purposes, 'problem-orientated' research, policy or public discourse therefore *reinforce* certain (social or political) assumptions in regard to the 'label' '*nong min gong*' or '*da gong mei*'.

One crucial point here is that the labelling has an effect not only on policy-making at the governmental level but also at the personal level of the migrants. A label for a group of people can be understood as a way in which the external world claims that individuals are 'supposed to' belong to that category. Since one lives one's life with intersubjective relations with one's external world (Toren 2009), this 'labelling' can affect how one perceives oneself from the particular position that he or she has in the world and how one responds to the external 'label'. As the 'labelling' is usually based on dominant assumptions, it may simply ignore the individual's potential and ignore the rich and vivid (though maybe chaotic) individual interiority that is produced as one is constantly in the process of coming-into-knowing oneself; and as a result, it may place limits on individuals, socially or politically.

Because there are (social or political) assumptions attached to a label such as '*nong min gong*', the job of de-labelling becomes *emancipating* an individual from those

assumptions. To the migrants, to de-labe is to liberate from dominant assumptions from the external world, academia, governments, mass media, the locals, and so on. To anthropologists, to de-label is first and foremost not to reinforce the existing assumptions, and then, if possible, to challenge those epistemological assumptions.

Here, another crucial point arises regarding the moral concern of an anthropological project: ‘Anyone’s humanity precisely is this capacity to feel, interpret and come to know for himself or herself’ (Rapport 2012: 4). Recognising the agency that an individual—not just migrants but ‘Anyone’ (ibid.)—embodies is not simply reifying him or her as a resilient subject within certain socio-cultural and historical norms but *de-labelling* while *acknowledging* the capacities of human expression that ‘Anyone’ has, so that the practice of migration (in the broadest sense) becomes a (potentially) shared human experience. I will elaborate on this in the next keyword that I would like to propose as a methodological quest—‘cosmopolitan imagination’.

To sum up, let me highlight explicitly the political significance of my research with a concern for individual interiority: *Individual interiority as anthropological inquiry (morally) and ethnographic research (methodologically) can be a potential way to disrupt (and potentially to complicate) the dominant narratives of the migrants’ experience, and thus to challenge the epistemological assumptions about them.*

## \* Cosmopolitan Imagination \*

In this section, I will propose another keyword, ‘cosmopolitan imagination’ to study home-in-movement, especially for archival research of migration correspondence, such as *qiaopi* family letters.

‘Cosmopolitanism’, as a concept, derives from the Greek conjunction of ‘cosmos’ and ‘polis’, a linking up of the whole world and a local life (Rapport 2007a). Through a cosmopolitan vision, one appreciates how one lives an individual life in one’s particular way—‘polis’—while at the same time it is appreciated how one is party to universal human conditions—‘cosmos’. As an ontological project, cosmopolitanism pursues the possibility of a bringing together of the two: epistemologically, aesthetically, and morally (Rapport 2012).

For most of us (if not all), there is a tension, nevertheless, between the self’s locally lived existence and the human potentialities of a wider world (the self and the others), most of the time. Moreover, this tension could become more obvious in the world of movement, since the practice of displacing oneself—away from home—requires one to make sense of the distance, the displacement, or the newness that accompanies migrancy. The process of making sense of these experiences would bring the tension between one and the world, one and the others, to the surface of one’s life in reality. To deal with this tension, as I have argued in Chapter Two, Chinese diasporic individuals like Zeng (for instance) managed to live a life through *qiaopi* correspondence. Their practice of *qiaopi* writing created a space for them to mediate tensions of many kinds in relation to the self and others—a cosmopolitan space. One created the space, and in turn, the space opened a door for one to express oneself, first through genre and then going beyond genre: to play roles that one wished to but could not play in reality; to be free in an as-if world by distancing oneself from one’s immediate environs; to self-negotiate the self and the world (precisely, the self and the particular others in a particular situation) by placing oneself in the in-between; to be free from one’s social, cultural or historical boundaries even just momentarily.



It can be contended that only when one manages to free oneself from one's various self-boundaries does it become possible to open up to or tolerate the viewpoints of others and their ways of being, and to break the dualism between the self and the others. Within this space, it becomes possible to bring together the 'cosmos' and the 'polis'. That is, not only is the space cosmopolitan, but also the creation of the space, the act of imagining oneself at home 'in the world' is cosmopolitan: hence, the 'cosmopolitan imagination'.

It is worth emphasising that my use of the term 'cosmopolitan' here entails a kind of imaginative space beyond what is being defined, bound, and classified, to something potential; it may influence how one experiences one's life and how one interprets those experiences. Furthermore, my use of the term 'cosmopolitan' does not intend to label an individual or a group of people—like Zeng or the Chinese diasporas—as being intrinsically 'cosmopolitan' or not. The cosmopolitan imagination does not necessarily always make one open to or tolerant towards the standpoints of others and their ways of being, but it has the potential to do so. It is 'a medium of experience and an interpretation of that experience' (Delanty 2009: 14) in a way that may (or may not) open one up to new perspectives on the world. It offers an opportunity. One may or may not accept the opportunity; it depends on one's intention within a specific moment. After all, our imagination is our capacity to 'formulate meaningful possibilities of otherness—of the world beyond our bodies—and build up interpretive models of the world and [includes] what it is we wish and may and will do with ourselves and others within it' (Rapport 2015: 19).

In his book, *The Cosmopolitan Imagination: The Renewal of Critical Social Theory*, Gerard Delanty (2009: 14) argues that such imagination is 'a matter of...an immanent orientation that takes shape in modes of self-understanding, experiences, feelings and collective identity narratives'. He addresses the cosmopolitan imagination as the way in which societies respond to the experience of globality while emphasising 'the critical moment in which changes in self-understanding occur as a result of global challenges' (ibid.: 16). In other words, it serves 'as a form of reflexivity in which global issues enter into the self-consciousness of people and movement' (ibid.: 78).

Here, we reach a point where we may address the significance of *qiaopi* in constructing a cosmopolitan space for the Chinese diasporas; hence, too, the implications

for (future) *qiaopi* studies that examine *qiaopi* as a living process that inscribe their authors' individual consciousness within the Chinese diaspora. Most recent *qiaopi*-related studies in China focus on the sociocultural value of *qiaopi* at different levels of social organization, such as international (e.g. Hong and Li 2006; Zhang and Huang 2016), national (e.g. Li 2016; Zhang and Li 2016), regional (e.g. Liu 2009; Wang and Yang 2007; Wei 2016), and familial (e.g. Chen 2016; Li 2016; Wang 2016). They do so in order to examine the dynamic relations between Chinese diasporic communities and the homeland. What little has been published in English tends to tackle issues such as transnational capitalism (e.g. Liu and Benton 2016), charity (e.g. Liu and Benton 2014), gender (e.g. Shen 2010, 2012), and family business (e.g. Liu 2005). They are all of great importance since they have helped establish a foundation for *qiaopi* studies from which we can interpret *qiaopi* as historical documents and the practice of circulating *qiaopi* as a historical phenomenon. Their greatest shortcoming, however, is in treating *qiaopi* not *as a living process of coming-into-being* but rather *as a historical finished product*.

To examine *qiaopi* as a living process of coming-into-being is to insist upon a temporal approach to the diaspora's momentary experience of home and the world. Simultaneously, it opens up fresh perspectives on related issues (such as the sociocultural values of *qiaopi*, *qiaopi* and gender, or *qiaopi* and charity) through the consideration of the space for, as well as the act of, cosmopolitan imagination in writing *qiaopi*. That is to say, by interpreting the same 'material'—the *qiaopi* archives—as illocutionary acts, time and space may no longer be taken as fixed realities, but rather as constituting new contingent realities. To add this additional ontological dimension to the investigation, and achieve an appreciation of related issues in turn, requires a researcher to approach the *qiaopi* archives with his or her cosmopolitan imagination.

### **Cosmopolitan imagination: a methodological quest in *qiaopi* study**

From 2011 to 2013, I conducted archival research on *qiaopi* in Shantou, China (Chen 2015a), by reading piece after piece, for hours after hours, going from one story to another. After reading thousands of pieces of *qiaopi*, I found that underneath the neat and civilised *qiaopi* genre are tumultuous lives full of noise. So many of the lives expressed through *qiaopi* are about suffering for the self (and self-justification), for the family and

for the sake of love, for an everlasting nostalgia and an ever-coming future. Many times, I dissolved into helpless sorrow, my eyes filling with tears. It seems to me that to try to understand these *qiaopi* the task becomes to make sense of kinds of human suffering; or to put it more precisely, the task of making sense of their making sense of their migratory experience.

To ‘access’ the individual *qiaopi* authors’ consciousness through reading their *qiaopi*, first of all requires me to read their *qiaopi beyond the genre*. The act of writing a *qiaopi* is constrained by social conventions, so the opportunity for personal expression is limited. Thus, to understand the personal aspect of those documents requires a clear impression of what is and is not part of the convention. Therefore a large number of documents must be studied in order to identify expressive elements. More importantly, trying to understand an individual author is necessarily a creative and imaginative act on the part of the reader (in this case, me, an anthropologist): it requires one to imagine their imagination. In other words, the reader’s imagination breathes new life into the *qiaopi* authors’s imagination.

But, how can I read their minds? How can I know their imagination? One’s imagination is one’s own secret, about anything to do with the external world. The process of imagination is an individual’s intimate act. It is the external world internally inhabiting one’s mind. For instance, I am not Zeng. I can never be Zeng. And I can never know what Zeng felt like to be himself exactly. His imagining is hidden from me because of the discrete embodiments of Zeng and me. Where might the two different biographies converge? Is it possible to bridge the gap in-between two individuals, when each is in his or her own biography and attached to his or her own sociocultural constitution? I would answer, ‘Yes’. There is a possibility. The possibility comes from our human potential to have a cosmopolitan imagination.

Let me explain by using Zeng’s case again. In the course of carefully reading over 3000 pieces of *qiaopi*, written by more than 45 migrants, Zeng was the first whom I ‘met’ in my ‘field site’. The very first time I visited the archive, I encountered Zeng’s *qiaopi* as soon as I opened the first page of the first volume of *The Chaoshan Qiaopi Archives Selection*. Reading his first piece of *qiaopi*, I felt like I was making my first visit to Zeng’s family and that he had started introducing himself, his mother, his wife, his son

and his two sisters to me. The more *qiaopi* by him I read, the more I learned about Zeng and the more involved I became with his family. I became more and more familiar with the ‘field site environment’ of *qiaopi* research, began to know about the genre of *qiaopi*, and to learn the hidden ‘culture’ that undergirds the writing of *qiaopi*, such as traditional Chinese morals and values. Indeed, in the process of becoming familiar with this ‘exotic’ environment, I even experienced what I can only call ‘culture shock’. Learning the local language of a ‘field site’ entails developing familiarity with individual idiolect. Here, in this written archive, this includes classical Chinese in traditional characters occasionally mixed with homophones of the Chaoshan dialect—words that would be considered incorrectly written. By becoming more and more ‘involved’ in Zeng’s family, reading his *qiaopi* at times made me feel sad, excited, bored, or even tearful; and this empathy finds reflection in the ‘field notes’ I recorded after reading each piece.

More importantly, when I read Zeng, I read him as an individual who made decisions throughout the writing of his *qiaopi*. Besides the conventional parts, Zeng might have needed to decide what else he would or should put in a letter. ‘Should I tell my mother about the flood disaster here?’ ‘Would that worry her too much if I told her?’ Or ‘should I let them know I feel lonely especially during the Spring Festival?’ Eventually, to express his homesickness and concern for his mother’s health, Zeng just wrote down sentences such as ‘I, your son, as a guest here far away from home, was extremely glad to know that you were in good health and everything went well at home’ and ‘I hope that our homeland is at peace’. Instead of using words like ‘I miss home’, ‘sad’ or ‘lonely’, Zeng chose words like ‘extremely glad to know’ and ‘I hope’. His homesickness and nostalgia were laid out on the page in a hesitant and almost invisible manner. He did not just write a letter; he wrote a feeling. His family did not just read a letter; they also read a feeling, and I do likewise. As a reader, I feel Zeng’s homesickness *in between the lines*. The very hesitancy, the limited use of words like ‘as a guest’, or ‘our homeland’ serve as fleeting clues about his difficult circumstances. That is, a piece of *qiaopi* is to be read *as much for what is not said as for what is said*.

In conducting *qiaopi* archival research, how can I read for what is not said? How should I, as an anthropologist, read this ‘field’ between lines? Tristan Platt and Quisbert Pablo (2007: 119) examine the historical practice of ‘re-enactment’ described by R. G.

Collingwood and argue that knowing the past involves ‘the imaginative re-enactment of other people’s thoughts, purposes, experiences and intentions’. To re-enact the thoughts and actions of people in the past, as Platt and Quisbert (ibid.: 126) put it, ‘a deal of imagination is required’. At this point, they introduce another idea from Collingwood, ‘a priori imagination’ (ibid.). Historical traces that remain even until today are always incomplete and the imagination provides the historical reconstruction. As Platt and Quisbert (ibid.) interpret Collingwood’s point, the ‘webs of imagination’ are not spun between the fixed points of ‘facts’ given us by our authorities. We have to criticise the authorities in order to ‘achieve’ these fixed points. So, when I ‘read’ the ‘field’, I try to read against the grain: to read *qiaopi* not just for what is said but also for how it is said, not just for what is included but also for what is omitted.

Furthermore, in order to grasp and comprehend his intentions, I try to explore any possible ‘as if’ scenarios. For every single situation that Zeng faced, I keep my openness to read him as an infinitely complex human being—a multifaceted person who performed a different self at different moment of his life. By considering any possible ‘as if’ through the ‘dialogic imagination’ instead of the ‘monologic’ (Beck 2002), I attempt to free a space from my own biography and sociocultural boundaries in order to internalise the perspectives of Zeng, and then imagine his world from his perspectives. Here, it is the attempt to internalise the perspective of others—‘an attitude of openness to, tolerance toward, and a desire to comprehend the standpoints of others and their ways of being’ (Wardle 2015: 42)—that makes the imaginative act (of reading the *qiaopi* archives) cosmopolitan.

In short, in doing *qiaopi* archival research, it is out of the experience of a cosmopolitan imagination that any *qiaopi* author’s voice becomes audible to me and thus any *qiaopi* author becomes knowable. This is what I mean by using a cosmopolitan imagination in doing *qiaopi* archival research, or broadly speaking, researching any kind of international migration correspondence.

Nevertheless, even having a cosmopolitan imagination in conducting research does not mean that there is no challenge. One obvious challenge<sup>60</sup> is that sometimes it is

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<sup>60</sup> Other challenges exist. There were a substantial number of *qiaopi* not written by the migrants themselves but by *daixie* (dictation for the illiterate) agents. *Daixie* agents wrote *qiaopi* on behalf of the Chinese

difficult to know if those letters genuinely illustrate the intentions of their authors, or if the authors wrote in the way in which they thought their recipients across the ocean would want or expect; even I had to try hard to read the letters against the grain. Or, the authors may simply have lied to their families. This would require research to explore the possible ‘as if’ situations, research that might result in a mess, or in an endless loop of imagination. However, sometimes it can be exciting reveal a hidden inner world of the author—such as the fear of failure, the stigma of shame—if we explore further questions such as ‘if it is a lie, what roles (social or imaginary) may the author play when lying in writing a piece of *qiaopi*?’ Or ‘if it is a lie, why are they lying?’

In short, employing a cosmopolitan imagination in *qiaopi* archival research cannot guarantee access to a solid *set of knowledge*; rather, it implies research that is a *getting to know* process. As Master He (the fortune-teller whom Yang Cui visited in Chapter Five) once advised me: ‘*It takes time to learn how to be at peace enough in order to sense any chaos inside a soul*’. I will elaborate on this more in the following section and propose one more keyword, ‘walking knowledge’.

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diasporas overseas and some also wrote *qiaopi* replies on behalf of the diasporas’ families in China. Usually, *qiaopi* written by *daixie* are in good handwriting. For those *qiaopi* not written by *daixie*, some are written in rather unpractised writing, some mix homophones of local dialects and some contain many errors. Whether they were written by *daixie* or by inarticulate and inexperienced correspondents becomes a challenge in doing research on the *qiaopi*, especially when attempting to explore the author’s individual consciousness on the process of writing.

## **\* Walking Knowledge \***

We walk so we touch, listen, smell, look, breathe, move, think, learn, imagine, and experience space and time. Walking through the weather-world, Ingold (2010: 136) said, ‘conscious awareness...increases in concentration and intensity with the fluency of action, along the ever-extending path-ways of the body’s sensory entanglement in the lifeworld.’ While walking in the wilderness of the western part of the United States for decades, Scottish-American environmental philosopher John Muir came up with the idea of the national park (Wolfe 1979). Through our sensual experience, we can walk to know the world and to think about how the world should look.

Can we also walk to know others? Jackson (2007) traced the route that Walter Benjamin took across the Pyrenees in French Catalonia, in order to better understand Benjamin’s frame of mind and to translate his thoughts through seeking parallels and echoes between their walking experiences. Rapport (2009) explained the possibility of this way of knowing by distinguishing how walking embodies an objective phenomenology as well as a subjective phenomenology, when he walked with a tour to visit the Auschwitz memorial site and interrogated the possibility of approaching authors such as Primo Levi and Imre Kertesz. The phenomenological objectivity of walking points to ‘the way consciousness is engaged by the physical processes involved in traversing a landscape on foot’ for all human beings, while phenomenological subjectivity emphasises ‘an individual consciousness engaging in imaginative projects of disembodiment and otherness’ (Rapport 2009: 32-33).

I started this research by *walking*, in order to know the world that I was studying and the people within that world. I found that the more I walked, the longer the road ahead seems; walking to get to know the self, others, and the world has no end. At this moment, let me stop and turn around, to look back at those ‘paths’ that I walked:

- I walked into Bomaqiao soon after I arrived, into its polluted air, and then into its environment with its changing soundscapes and changing foodscapes, as well as

into the people's collective memory of the Nanyang migration and *qiaopi* (Chapter One).

- I then walked into Shantou *Qiaopi* Archive, into the world of *qiaopi*, into Zeng's writing, into his life, his moments of being, his cosmopolitan imagination, and his interiority (Chapter Two).
- Moving into the courtyard-house, I walked into a space that was *home* for Grandma Chang, a *non-home* space for Yang Cui, and *the outside world* for Xiao Bin; I walked into the their floating mind-set of homeawayness (Chapter Three).
- Working together with the migrant workers in the Shunxin Factory, I walked into the lives in the Bomaqiao industrial park with busy traffic, noise, pollution, and crowds, into the migrant factory workers' interior tensions between work and life, the tensions between the locals and the migrants, and the tensions between the imagination of the self and others (Chapter Four).
- Towards the end of my fieldwork, I stepped into the only, small piece of 'farmland protection zone' in Bomaqiao (where I met Master He and a few other migrants) and by listening to Yang Cui telling me about her dream; *for the first time* I walked into Yang Cui's trust, her inner world, her self-contradiction, her inner struggle between self and social (family) obligation, moral and immoral, present *live-life* and future home, and so on (Chapter Five).

What kind of 'knowledge' would come out from all the 'walking'? Derived from my various kinds of 'walking' experiences in the field, I name my continually growing knowledge 'walking knowledge', which one gains through one's embodied experience—not just walking specifically, but *doing*, in its widest sense.

For me, it is my walking knowledge that led me to move on in my fieldwork and to find my 'path' on the way to exploring further human knowledge, especially our ideas of the self, home and the world. One is constantly engaged in the process of *getting to know* the self—though it is often expressed as one's moments of being—while making home is intertwined with the constant process of making sense of the self and the world. *To propose the phrase 'walking knowledge' as a keyword for studying home-in-movement is to emphasise the epistemological openness in the process of constantly making sense of*



*one's self, home, and the world.* There is no end to the path of walking to know the self, others, and the world. Each 'end' is just a new beginning (as Zeng's last piece of *qiaopi* vividly tells us).

During my fieldwork farewell party, Master He (the fortune-teller) and I had a short conversation:

**Master He:** What are you going to do next?

**Shuhua:** I will go back to the university and write about my fellow workers' lives...

**Master He:** No, no, no. Don't write about them, write about yourself. You can never go into their world if you write about them. Write about yourself and *Laotian* (heaven) will help you, bring messages to you, and help you to get to know them.

**Shuhua:** Oh?! Can I write them down?<sup>61</sup>

**Master He:** Yes, but don't try to write down everything. Leave some space to hold *Laotian's* message.

**Shuhua:** How? When?

**Master He:** It comes when it comes.

**Shuhua:** But how can I receive *Laotian's* message?

**Master He:** Close your eyes and you will see the world inside you. Cultivate your hearing and hear voices inside you. It takes time to practise it.

A few seconds passed, and we were both quiet. Another few seconds passed. The quietness between us seemed to become purer, richer and heavier, as if my hearing had been 'fine-tuned' (Ingold 2000: 37) to the surrounding chatty crowd over the couple of seconds. A few more seconds passed. I pulled out my notebook from my pocket, and noted down our conversation and the momentary quietness that I had experienced. I always tried to take notes from his words because they always took me time to digest and understand. Most of his words were full of philosophy but they were always oxymoronic and dogmatic as well. Master He saw that I was taking notes. He spoke again:

**Master He:** Will you come back again? Come back, and do some practice. The world you see blocks your vision; the world you hear dulls your hearing ability. It takes time to practise it.

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<sup>61</sup> I always checked with him whether I could record or share his words, since most of the time he said 'no'. In particular, he never allowed me to get into his hut while he was fortune telling, because those are 'secrets' from *Laotian* (heaven), he said.

That reminded me of William James' statement: '*[i]ntrospective observation is what we have to rely on first and foremost and always*' (1981: 185, cited in Thompson 2006: 228); also of what James Gibson (1966) means by the way we use our perceptual systems *actively*; of what Evan Thompson (2006: 227) suggests as '*neuropsychology*' and '*contemplative experience*'; and, finally, of what Paul Stoller means by (2013) '*cultivate the inner senses*', which I had been trying to understand.

Suddenly, Master He's words made me feel that, on the one hand, the past fourteen months of fieldwork had been a failure because I had *done* (e.g. listened, looked) so little; on the other hand, his words pointed me in the direction of potential future projects and their potential significance, i.e. to cultivate my hearing to hear voices inside myself in order to know others and the world, to cultivate my vision to see the world inside myself in order to know others and the outside world.

'It takes time to *practise* it', Master He had said twice in our conversation. This echoes the essence of walking knowledge: learning through the experience of walking/doing/practising *per se*; knowing details through experience (within and across space and time) at a relatively slow-pace. It is not really about the result; it is the process that counts. Aiming at, and focusing on, the result may result in *rushing* the process and therefore one may miss out the opportunity to 'expand our imagination and extend our consciousness' (Stoller 2013: 367).

In modern China, as I observed, the idea of a 'fast-paced' life occupies the mind-set of the majority. The feeling did not just come from walking but also from many other aspects of my everyday life during the fieldwork. The local world is running like a fast-spinning washing machine that keeps the individuals within it spinning busily, and makes it difficult to escape from the running system. Migrant workers move from one factory to another, looking for full-time working hours. Even the local elders, like the one I mentioned in Chapter One, do not enjoy the sunshine while knitting and assembling toys for wages. 'Hurry up' seems to be the inner voice of everyone in Bomaqiao, even though most of them feel 'stressed' and 'exhausted' due to the fast-paced life. From my local experience in Bomaqiao, I caught a glimpse of the general speeding-up of life in contemporary China.

I found that having a 'fast-paced' life, as a common mentality, was manifested in

many aspects of people's lives: in using high-speed transportation, consuming fast food, having instant amusement, and experiencing blitz marriages, just to name some. All of these fast consumptions drive people to *rush through life* in search of various kinds of immediate gratification, which are not necessarily 'sustainable' in the long run. This unsustainability can be understood in two ways. The fast-and-rushed consumption may produce a large amount of unnecessary 'rubbish' such as greenhouse gases, traffic noise, chemical pollution, and landfill waste, which will exhaust our living environment. By-products of the fast-and-rushed consumption such as failed marriages or divorces from blitz marriages, worthless information gathering just for the sake of gathering, or the loneliness that one may feel in a crowded world also exhaust the individual human mind. In short, it is sustainable neither for our human living environment as a whole, nor for individuals' self-cultivation.

So, for the sake of our environmental concerns and for our self-cultivation, can we slow down? Can power also emerge from slow movement? Is it a different kind of power from the one generated by fast movement? In writing Chinese calligraphy, the slow movement of every single stroke is supposed to store up the power of a character. Likewise, in traditional Chinese brush painting, the imparting of a sense of living movement—imbuing strokes with life on a painting—is acquired from application at a 'proper' speed, usually slowly but surely. Similarly, in practising Tai Chi, one moves slowly yet with so much energy that the slow motion facilitates one to enter a meditative state and nurtures one's awareness of the body. Here, the power that inhabits the slow movement is a potential one: having energy waiting to be released. It is the power that one absorbs inwards, which is different from the other kind that is released outwards through fast movement. Yet, I found very little of this slow-life philosophy in the local world of Bomaqiao, and in modern China as a whole.

We live in a 'fast-paced' world. Can walking slow us down? If so, then 'speed' should be examined as both an aspect of local life-worlds and a methodology for anthropology, a prototypical 'slow science'.

## **\* Concluding Discussion \***

### ***Is human being an oxymoronic being?***

In brief, I propose five keywords (homeawayness, moments of being, interiority, cosmopolitan imagination, and walking knowledge) with the aim of better understanding how one makes sense of the self and the world—theoretically and methodologically, ontologically and epistemologically—through making a home on the move. Nevertheless, discussing each keyword on its own is somehow a mistake. They actually speak to one another.

Being away from home in order to make a home, the movement of migration itself becomes one's quest for home, as well as a way of knowing the self, home and/or the world. One comes to know one's self (better and better) through one's constant self-negotiation of one's identities (in relation to home, the self, and others) in different situations and moments. Home is thus experienced and made sense of in one's moments of being.

Life is like a flow but we make sense of it in moments. Within a moment of being, we step back to review or to look forward (Rapport and Overling 2000: 257-261). But the momentary 'stepping back' is still part of the greater flow of life, as 'returning' home for migrants is still part of one's life-project. For migrants, each attempt to 'return' home (whether physically or cognitively) itself becomes a way of home-making. With each return one does not get back to one's starting point and form a circle; instead one follows a spiral curve that always leads further and further away from the origin. That is, as I have argued, each return, as a way of making home, forms a movement that is neither circular nor linear but spiralling onward.

Along one's spiralling-onward trajectory of home, the boundaries between home and away, between home and the self, and between home and the world are permeable. Home and away cannot exist without each other. The relationship between home and the self is dynamic. In regard to home and the world, they are each one's own shadow. When the two overlap—at home in the world—the shadow disappears. Being absent from one's original home, the movement creates the space for a migrant to rethink home and to make

a home beyond a fixed, spatial and material one. Such acts of making home enable one to be at home in the world. ‘Home’, in a world of movement, therefore becomes less like a noun and more like a verb—‘homing’, a *doing* (e.g. dwelling, making, feeling, remembering, writing or returning) (Ahmed 1999; Jackson 2005; Ingold 1995). Home becomes those very practices from which space-time unfolds so that home can be sensed, experienced, and expressed.

Home itself may have no boundary but we bind it with various ‘walls’ to enclose it. Having presumptions about the other or the world and making judgements based on those presumptions can be closed-minded: one only hears what one wants to hear; one only sees what one wants to see; one’s mind becomes a filter of the rich world. Opening one’s mind means getting rid of the filter, hearing more and seeing further. If home is essentially boundless, then to study home requires us to have a cosmopolitan imagination: to open our minds to difference, as well as to open our being to others and to the world. Home, a very personal affair, is also a universally-shared concept that has existed in different societies and cultural communities throughout human history.

All in all, it seems that home can be everywhere or nowhere; home can be everything or nothing. The more I attempt to ‘grasp’ home, the more problematic and complicated it becomes. Or, maybe, home is so simple that only when we make it ‘problematic’ and ‘complicated’ can we grasp some of its essence. Is that not oxymoronic?

To some degree, all five keywords are apparently self-contradictory terms and the meanings they express are oxymoronic, both ontologically and epistemologically.

Keyword	Ontologically	Epistemologically
<b>Homeawayness</b>	One has a <i>rooted</i> home somewhere else (whether concrete or imagined) while having one’s everyday life <i>uprooted</i> from that home.	One makes sense of <i>home</i> and constructs home by <i>not being at home</i> .
<b>Moments of Being</b>	Being is a way of becoming <i>continually</i> but one experiences it <i>in moments</i> .	One makes sense of one’s <i>flow-like</i> life by <i>stepping back</i> momentarily.
<b>Interiority</b>	As one’s inner consciousness, one is continually having <i>conversations with oneself</i> .	One comes to know oneself by <i>listening to one’s self-arguments</i> .

<b>Cosmopolitan Imagination</b>	One lives a life in one's particular way ( <i>polis</i> ) and at the same time opens up to an appreciation of universal human conditions ( <i>cosmos</i> ).	One <i>opens one's being</i> in order to better understand <i>others and the world</i> .
<b>Waking Knowledge</b>	One gains one's walking knowledge through one's (singular) subjective phenomenology of walking as well as our (shared) <i>objective</i> phenomenology of walking.	Walking becomes a way of knowing our humanity, which is at once <i>shared</i> and <i>singular</i> .

**Table 1 – Oxymoronic keywords for studying home-in-movement**

Not just the keywords, but throughout the whole of this research, I found that much of the human condition is oxymoronic:

- For both the local government and the local villagers, the fast industrialisation in Bomaqiao is a way of development—‘developing’ the area by polluting the area.
- For the migrant workers with whom I worked, leaving their families was the result of their love for them; they showed their love by hiding their love; they called somewhere ‘home’ when they were not home for more than eleven months of the year; they had gone ‘there’ to maintain ‘here’; being-at-home for them became their annual holiday during the Chinese New Year, while being-away-from-home came to stand for their everyday lives.
- For anthropologists, in ethnographic writing, in order to write about ‘others’, we may try our best to write as closely as possible about our understanding of them based on our fieldwork experience; in other words, writing about others by writing not about others but the self.

In doing anthropology, I would argue that to some extent it is the oxymoronic human condition—human beings are both unique and the same—that gives us our subject-matter. ‘Our humanity is at once shared and singular’ (Jackson 2012: 6). We are the same species but at the same time we are individually embodied. From this perspective, there is an oxymoronic quality to human knowledge: the impossibility coexists with the possibility. The impossibility of human knowledge comes from the fact that we are different

individual embodiments (i.e. ‘I can never know what it is like to be you’). But, I am a human being in a human body—the phenomenological objectivity of being for all humankind (the way consciousness is engaged for all human beings), so I can imagine and get to know you through interpreting—the phenomenological subjectivity of being for an individual. Thus, the possibility comes from the human capacity to ‘engage in imaginative projects of disembodiment and others’ (Rapport 2009: 32-33). That is to say, the impossibility of human knowledge lies within the possibility of human knowledge—and vice versa: There is no certainty to human knowledge. The more we claim we know, the more we risk mistaking ourselves and knowing less; the more we invest, the greater we risk; but, we nevertheless learn from the mistakes we make. The oxymoronic nature of the human condition makes it possible for anthropologists to probe human sameness through the study of individuals and to probe universal principles through the detailed, individual empirical facts of social life.

In saying this, I close this thesis by opening a new topic of discussion: *Is the human being an oxymoronic being?*

## Epilogue

This is an ironic moment along my journey of doing this research project. This epilogue was not part of my original plan. The whole thesis has been written and the draft has been printed out, and I am about to read through it. My eyes stop at the first piece of a message: Figure 1 on the first page of the Introduction, a notion of home written by one of my informants. It is one of the six notes (concerning the idea of home) that I had been very pleased to receive as ‘gifts’<sup>62</sup> from my fieldwork ‘farewell party’, written by my fellow factory-workers. I feel good using it and I also think that I should have included more of these notes in my thesis, as they are my fellows’ original expressions of home, their own descriptions of home—the ‘native voice’. Thinking about this, I immediately bring out the six notes and read them once again.

I pick up one in which home was expressed beautifully and read it aloud:

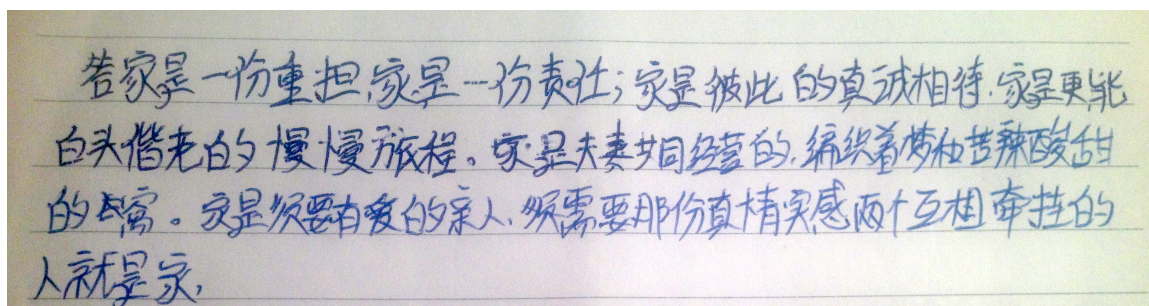


Figure 73 - A notion of home from a migrant worker, a gift I received at my fieldwork farewell party

*'Home is a millstone, a duty. Home is devotion to one another with sincerity. Home is about the slow journey of having a long life together with loved ones. Home is the nest crafted by the joint effort of spouses, with the dream they weave, with the joy and sorrow they share. It requires a family with love to make a home. It requires genuine emotions to make a home. Two people deeply concerned about each other make a home.'*

<sup>62</sup> One day before my fieldwork farewell party, several fellow workers asked me what kind of gift I would like to have to bring back to UK. Without a second thought, I told them that it would be nice to have their ideas of home written down on a piece of paper—‘What does home mean to you?’ So at the party, I received six written notes as gifts.



I thought: what a poetic expression of the idea of home!

Thinking further about this, I open my computer and, in Chinese, google ‘What is home?’ (‘什么是家’), out of curiosity. To my shock, the first Google result replicates the note (above) that my informants had ‘composed’ for me—which I had supposed to be their own words and thoughts (and sentiments)! ... How little have I actually done in my project and known? How much more is waiting to be done? I am suddenly speechless.

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# Ethics Approval

26 October 2011

Shuhua Chen  
Department of Social Anthropology

Ethics Reference No: Please quote this ref on all correspondence	SA8041
Project Title:	Making home on the move: an anthropological study of migration in China
Researchers Name(s):	Shuhua Chen
Supervisor(s):	Professor Nigel Rapport and Dr Stephanie Bunn

Thank you for submitting your application which was considered at the Department of Social Anthropology meeting on the 21st October 2011. The following documents were reviewed:

1. Ethical Application Form

21 October 2011

The University Teaching and Research Ethics Committee (UTREC) approves this study from an ethical point of view. Please note that where approval is given by a School Ethics Committee that committee is part of UTREC and is delegated to act for UTREC.

Approval is given for completion within the stated time period. Projects, which have not commenced within the time given must be re-submitted to your School Ethics Committee.

You must inform your School Ethics Committee when the research has been completed. If you are unable to complete your research within the validation period, you will be required to write to your School Ethics Committee and to UTREC (where approval was given by UTREC) to request an extension or you will need to re-apply.

Any serious adverse events or significant change which occurs in connection with this study and/or which may alter its ethical consideration, must be reported immediately to the School Ethics Committee, and an Ethical Amendment Form submitted where appropriate.

Approval is given on the understanding that the 'Guidelines for Ethical Research Practice' (<http://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/media/UTRECguidelines%20Feb%2008.pdf>) are adhered to.

Yours sincerely

Adam Reed

On behalf of the Convenor of the School Ethics Committee